The WOOD RIDER

FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK

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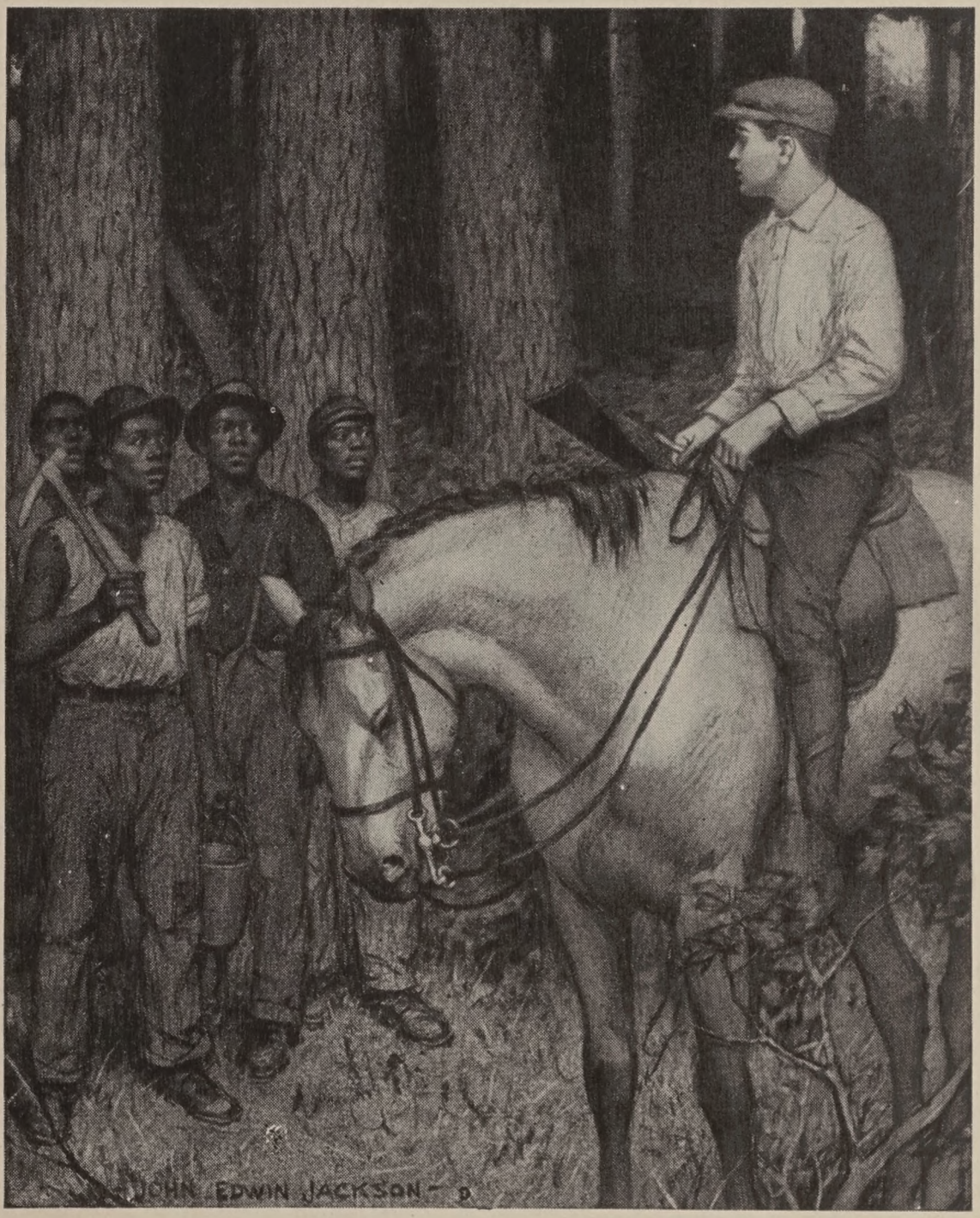
THE WOODS-RIDER



"What 's the matter? Why are n't you boys at work?"

THE WOODS-RIDER

BY

FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK
Author of "WILDERNESS HONEY," etc.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Wreck in the Woods	3
II	Old Dick's Bees	27
III	The River Orchard	48
IV	Disappointment	60
V	Buried Treasure	87
VI	Disaster	104
VII	Stolen Rosin	118
VIII	The River Island	141
IX	Bees and Rosin	160
X	Down the River	181
XI	The Bayou Bees	201
XII	Taming the Wild Bees	221
XIII	Pirates' Treasure	245
XIV	Under Fire	264
XV	The Treasure of Rosin	290
XVI	The Bee Raft	311
XVII	War on the River	332
XVIII	The Harvest	361

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

"What 's the matter? Why are n't you boys at work?" . . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

By its light he was able to find a strong enough piece of wood for a lever 12

Apparently nobody had been there since their own last visit 228

With the next daylight they began the work of tearing down Old Dick's cabin 316

THE WOODS-RIDER

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CHAPTER I

WRECK IN THE WOODS

LEANING from his saddle, Joe Marshall looked into the cup that hung on the turpentine-tree. One side of the great long-leaf pine had been stripped of its bark to a height of three feet, leaving a tall, livid scar, sticky with resinous exudation. A thick layer of hardened gum crusted over its lower edge, and two tin gutters near the top carried the gummy oozings into the two-quart tin cup suspended from a hook driven into the tree. It was only March, but the weather had been unusually warm, and the gum was running in thin viscous threads imperceptibly slow, but the cup was half full of the sticky whitish mass.

"I declare, we can begin dipping soon!" Joe said to himself, glancing around at the other pines, which were all similarly blazed and tapped.

This was the best corner of the Burnam turpentine "orchard." The trees that grew here were splendid long-leaf pines, shooting up straight as arrows almost a hundred feet before they broke into palm-like branches; and many of them were so large that the turpentine gatherers had been able to chip them on both sides, and hang two cups on them.

For about two hundred yards this park-like growth lasted, where his horse's feet trod silently on the thick layer of pine-needles; then a slight descent took him out into the open ground. The sunlight seemed blinding after the shade of the woods. The sky was hazily blue, radiating an intense heat. High overhead two buzzards soared in circles. The ground was a tangle of gallberry-bushes, and Joe rode through them by a trail that he followed daily on his rounds. From the gallberry flat it led down to a creek swamp, dense with titi and bay-trees and tangled with bamboo-vine, and it wound through this jungle across the creek itself.

"Want to drink, Snowball?" said Joe, as the black horse showed an inclination to pause at the clear water; and while Snowball drank Joe dis-

mounted and dashed water over his face and arms. It was unusually hot for March, even in southern Alabama, and from the look of the sky he judged that there might be thunder before night.

Joe was one of Burnam's three woods-riders, and it was his duty to keep his eye on the run of gum and the work of the negroes on a third of the big tract. As he rode on he encountered several of the "chippers" at work, making the regular enlargement of the blaze on the pine-bark; occasionally he found a tree neglected, and had to find the man in whose "furrow" it lay, reprimand him, and send him back; now and then he had to stop and readjust a cup that had become displaced. Once he found two negroes idling and swapping stories behind a thicket, and he sent them back to work with good-natured bullying, which they took with equal good nature. They understood Joe Marshall, and he understood them.

He swung through the woods in a wide circle that would at last take him back to the camp. It was growing late in the afternoon, and most of the negroes were also straggling out of the

woods. Provided they finished their furrow, they could leave when they pleased; but from the top of a ridge Joe caught sight of a chipper still at work, going at a fast trot from tree to tree. His clothes were ragged and there were not many of them; his arms were bare, and his black face streamed with perspiration. He carried a "turpentine-hack," a tool very like a small pick with a keen, gouging end, and at each tree he ripped away with a skilful stroke another inch of the gummy bark at the top of the slash.

"Seems to me you 're working mighty hard for a hot day, Sam," Joe remarked as he rode up.

The chipper threw back his head and laughed loudly. Sam was one of the "Marshall negroes." His father had been a slave, owned by Joe's grandfather, and Joe and Sam had both been born on the Marshall estate, before the place was broken up. They were about the same age and had played together as white and negro children will. Sam had been Joe's lieutenant in many a hunting and fishing expedition, and when Joe had taken this place as woods-rider Sam had come as chipper in order to work in the woods with him.

"Yes-suh, Mr. Joe!" he cried, "I shorely is hot, but I reckon de weather goin' change, an' I wants to finish my furrow. Jus' you look down yander in de souf. What you reckon comin' up dere, Mr. Joe?"

"Thunderstorm, maybe," said Joe, looking at the haze over the sky, and the coppery clouds low in the south, rising out of the Mexican Gulf. Sam looked too, intent, seeming to sniff the air, and his eyes looked suddenly wise and far-seeing, like a wild animal's.

"I dunno, suh. Some kind o' storm, shore. Anyhow, I 's goin' mek for camp soon 's I finish my few mo' trees. Mr. Joe, you better ride back home."

"Oh, a thunderstorm won't hurt us," said Joe, laughing, and he rode on, intending to finish his usual round. He was anxious to give especial attention to his tract that day, for the next three days were to be a vacation. The other two wood-riders had agreed to look after his duties, and he was going to ride over to Uncle Louis's plantation, ten miles south, to meet his cousins from Canada.

He had never seen these cousins—Carl, Bob,

and Alice Harman—children of his father's sister who had married a Canadian, for they had never been south before, and he had never been north of Tennessee. Both their parents had been dead for some years. The three lived together, and, Joe understood, were in bee-keeping. It seemed to Joe an odd and shiftless sort of pursuit, especially in the land of snow and ice which he dimly conceived Canada to be. They had been in Alabama now for several weeks, and had been ten days at Uncle Louis's place, where they were to remain till spring. Joe understood that they were looking for more bees, and he chuckled at the idea. He knew where there were at least a dozen bee-trees. "Reckon I can show 'em all the bees they want!" he reflected. He had planned great entertainments for them. He would take them fishing for the giant Alabama catfish, take them 'possum hunting, show them the turpentine woods.

He rode on his wide curve through the pines, looking after the turpentine-cups, thinking of the Canadian visitors, when he suddenly became aware that the sun had disappeared. Glancing up through the feathery pine crests he saw a huge

bank of tumbled, coppery-black clouds rolling up fast from the south. The air seemed dead still, but a chill had come into it. Far away he heard a growl of thunder, still faint and distant, and Snowball tossed his head, snorted, and stamped, looking back nervously at his master.

It was not the usual time of the year for tornadoes, but he knew how terrific these Gulf thunderstorms sometimes are, and he did not want to be caught in the pine woods where any tall tree might draw the flash. But he remembered a bare, open flat not half a mile away, and, kicking Snowball in the ribs, he started through the woods at a reckless gallop, over logs and brush without ever swerving.

A wind rushed heavily over the trees, carrying a curtain of black cloud. Twilight seemed to fall in a single instant. Snowball was almost uncontrollable with fright, but he saw the open space ahead. As he tore out of the woods, Joe saw behind them a wall of blackness sweeping up the sky with an appalling roar. He jumped from the horse, scared, uncertain what to do, knowing well now that this was no mere thunderstorm. Snowball reared, jerking the bridle from

Joe's hand, and bolted. The next moment the storm burst.

The sheer force of the wind swept Joe off his feet and rolled him over and over. The air was thick with torn pine-needles, flying branches, and strips of bark; trees were crashing and rending, and there was an uproar as if a giant were treading down the forest like grass. Rain suddenly came down in a blinding torrent. Half dazed, Joe tried to get to his feet, made a staggering run without knowing where he went.

A sheet of bluish lightning seemed to explode just over the tree-tops. In the midst of the deafening thunder a great pine snapped at the butt, not a hundred feet away. Joe heard the roaring swish as it came down through the air, straight towards him. He made a plunge to get away, but stumbled; and the next instant he was struck down in a whirl of snapping branches.

That was the last he knew for several minutes at least. When he came to his senses, rain was still pouring down upon him. The ground was streaming with water; a cold river seemed running under his back. The wind still blew fiercely but the lightning was more distant, and the worst

of the storm seemed to have passed. He had no idea how long he had lain there, but the darkness now seemed to be, not of the storm, but of night.

He endeavored to raise himself, and found that something held him down with apparently enormous weight. It hurt, too; there was a pain in his chest, a sharp pain in his head. Dimly Joe imagined that the tree had fallen on him, and that he must be seriously wounded; but by groping with his hands he found that the trunk of the big pine had missed his body by a scant yard. His last jump had just saved his life, but one of the smaller branches had caught him across the body and pinned him down, though the mass of twigs had saved him from being crushed. Something had hit him on the head, too, but as he gradually came to himself he decided that he was not as badly broken to pieces as he had imagined. But for all his efforts, he could not work his way out from under the branch that pinned him fast down.

He wormed himself this way and that; he tried to hollow out the earth under him, until he had exhausted his strength. Then he shouted at the top of his voice, but in that roar of wind and

splash of rain he knew that there was scarcely a chance of any one's hearing him. Nearly all the men had left the woods.

The rain ceased to fall in torrents, slackening to a drizzle. The thunder already sounded far away. The storm was passing over as swiftly as it had come up. It had grown almost completely dark when at last Joe heard the far-away voice of a negro calling, echoing strangely through the woods. He yelled in answer; the voice approached; and presently he heard some one crashing through the bushes.

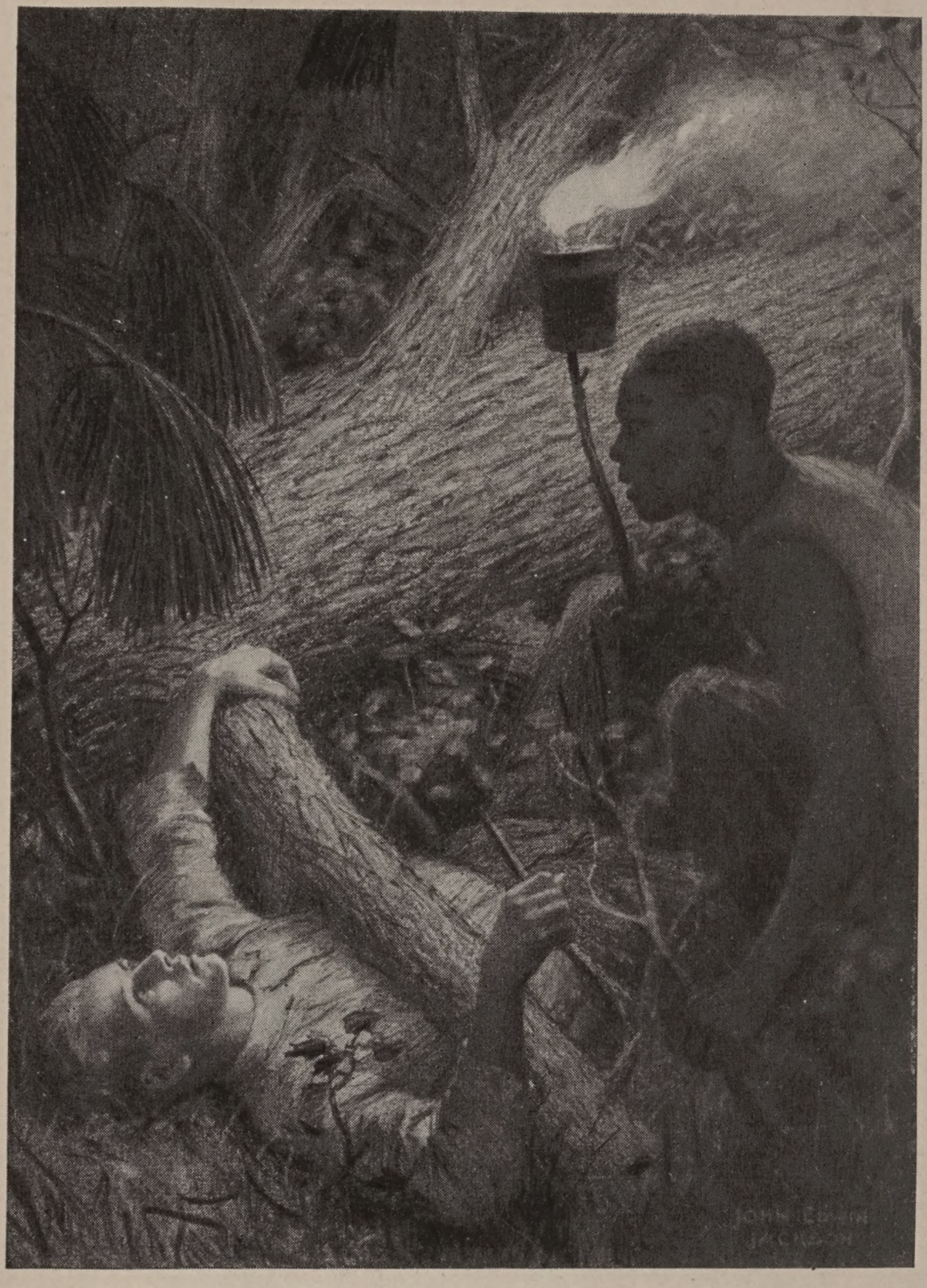
"Who dat a-callin'?" he heard a well-known voice. "Where is you?"

"Sam!" shouted Joe in delight. "Here—this way! I 'm down under a tree."

Sam appeared, a vague black shape in the blackness.

"Fo' de land's sake, Mr. Joe!" he exclaimed. "How you git dere? Is you hurted bad? Wait —I git you out!"

Sam pulled and hauled, aiding Joe's fresh efforts. He tried to shift the branch in vain, and it was too dark to see what he was about. Presently he stopped, groped about in the dark for



By its light he was able to find a strong enough piece of wood for a lever

some time, and then, squatting in a sheltered spot, began to scratch matches.

They were damp, and it was some time before he produced a flame. Then there was a sizzle, a flash, and a brilliant flare sprang up. Sam had found a cup half full of gum, and stuck the match down into the resinous stuff. It flamed up like a huge torch, blown in the wind, casting a lurid light on the chaos of the fallen timber, and Sam elevated it on a stick where it would illuminate his proceedings.

By its light he was able to find a strong enough piece of wood for a lever, which he inserted under the pine branch, and he raised it just enough to let Joe wriggle out. The negro solicitously looked him over; Joe felt himself anxiously, but he could not find any worse damage than a few bruises and a slight cut on the head just above his ear.

"No bones broken, Sam," he said. "I 'll be all right now in no time. But why were n't you back at camp?"

"Could n't mek it," said Sam. "De big wind cotched me in de woods, an' I just crawled under a log an' laid still, scared most to death. Seemed

like all de woods was goin' down, an' I reckon de best of 'em is down. Where de turpentine goin' to come from now? Say, Mr. Joe, don't you reckon dis de end of Mr. Burnam's turpentine camp?"

The same question had already occurred to Joe and troubled him. It meant a great deal.

"I don't know, Sam," he answered rather irritably. "Let 's try to get back to camp and see how things are there. Do you know where we are? I feel dizzy and turned around."

"Yessuh, Mr. Joe, I shore knows de way!" cried Sam with a loud burst of laughter. "I 's a piney-woods nigger, I is. Bawn an' raised right in dese hyar woods. Could n't lose my way here no-ways, no suh, capt'n!"

To show his confidence he started at once, conducting his young master with one hand and holding the flaring torch with the other. It was hard traveling. The ground was covered with trees, large and small, blown criss-cross in every direction, and Joe's heart sank more and more at the sight of the destruction of the turpentine pines.

For he was not merely an employee of Bur-

nam's camp. He was a shareholder. Everything he possessed in the world was tied up in that turpentine business. At the death of his father he had inherited a little money, placed in the hands of Uncle Louis as trustee and guardian. As he grew out of boyhood Joe had formed the plan of entering the turpentine business, a commerce which had been familiar to him from childhood, and Uncle Louis had invested the capital in the new camp which Burnam was starting. Joe went in as woods-rider, and it was supposed to be a good job and a safe investment. Burnam was well known as a successful operator, and the business promised a good return.

Uncle Louis, however, had carelessly failed to ascertain Burnam's financial responsibility. He was thought to be solid; but of late Joe had heard rumors that the camp had been started on a little money borrowed here and there like his own, and that it was now being carried mainly by the bank. Instead of a good investment it was a shaky speculation. Burnam was a skilful and experienced turpentine man. With luck he might pull through successfully: but a stroke of misfortune would be likely to put him into bank-

ruptcy. And it looked as if that stroke had come.

Sam burned two or three more cups of gum before they finally came out of the wrecked woods, and sighted the camp, built a hundred yards back from the main road that led in from the river landing. From a distance they could see a swarming and rushing of torches, and hear the voices of men, but the camp did not seem to be demolished as he had feared. It was less a camp than a small village of nearly fifty negro cabins and dwellings for the white officers, built in a hollow square around the turpentine-still, the cooper-shop, the storehouse, and the commissary-store. The road and the square were running with water, but everybody was out, and, to Joe's relief, he saw that the buildings seemed to be intact.

Just at the edge of the camp he met Tom Morris, one of the other woods-riders.

"Gracious, Joe!" he exclaimed. "You look as if you 'd been through a mill. Snowball came in half an hour ago, covered with mud and scared to death. Your saddle and rifle were on him, and we thought you 'd sure gone up. We were

just getting ready to go out to look for you. How are the woods?"

"Smashed up. How 's the camp?"

"No damage to speak of. The still 's all right, by good luck. The roofs of two or three cabins blew off, but the main track of the storm went a little west of us. But, say! is n't this going to hit Burnam pretty hard?"

"Afraid so, Tom," said Joe seriously. He did not want to discuss the matter; he felt too sore and uneasy. He avoided Burnam, who was hurrying about with Wilson, the camp foreman, to ascertain the damage. He went to look at Snowball, whom one of the negroes had unsaddled and brushed down a little, and then he slipped into his room at Wilson's house, where all the woods-riders boarded. He went to bed, intensely tired and aching, intending to think it all over; but he was scarcely there when he fell soundly asleep.

It was a little late when he awoke, to find brilliant sunshine at the windows. Morris, who shared his room, had already gone. Joe still felt somewhat stiff and sore, but he dressed and quickly went out.

The sky was as clear as if there had never been a storm, and the air was full of sparkle and lightness. The hard sand of the camp square was dry and firm already; the surrounding pines were a fresh-washed, vivid green. There were not many signs of the tempest visible here—only an unroofed cabin or two, a pine that had fallen right into the camp area, and the brook beside the road that flowed muddy and bank-full.

The routine of the camp was disorganized that morning. Negro women and children swarmed about the cabins, calling to one another; the chippers from the wrecked area loafed in the sun, smoking cigarettes, waiting for orders. Joe found Tom Morris near the still, talking with the foreman.

"I was waiting for you, Joe," said the rider. "Feel all right this morning? Burnam was up at daylight and rode off to look at the woods. He left word for you and me to go over your tract and report. Had your breakfast? Well, go get it quick."

Joe hurried over the meal, had Snowball brought round, and they rode off, Wilson going with them. The former wagon-trail into the

woods was badly choked with fallen timber; they had to make continual detours, and pick their way among the pines. The big turpentine tract lay in a rough rectangle north and south, and the storm, passing right down the middle, had raked it from end to end. The magnificent pines strewed the ground, were broken off at mid-height, stood leaning against one another, ready to fall at the next wind. Some of the gum-cups still clung to the trees; others lay scattered over the ground, spilling their thick contents. They rode through this scene of wreck for a mile or two, and then Wilson stopped his horse.

"I don't want to see no more, boys," he announced. "Looks to me like this camp 's plumb ruined. I reckon we 'll all have to hunt another job right soon."

"Oh, I don't know," said Morris, encouragingly. "It ain't all as bad as right here. And then, Burnam 's got the river orchard."

The river orchard was a tract of about five hundred acres lying close to the Alabama River, three miles away. The remainder of the turpentine woods had been merely leased for three years, but this tract belonged to Burnam out-

right. He had never turpentined it, because the tapping of the trees materially injures them for timber.

"Burnam won't turpentine the river orchard," said Wilson. "He 's saving it for timber."

"Well," he continued, after a gloomy pause, "I s'pose I 'd better go back to camp and get some niggers and gather up these here cups. Better save what we can."

For two or three hours Joe and Morris rode through the woods, finding it a depressing spectacle. In the direct track of the storm, fortunately not very wide, it looked as if hardly anything was left fit to turpentine. Outside that belt the damage was not so great, but the woods were so choked with fallen trees and debris that it would take weeks of labor, it seemed, to clear them enough to carry on operations.

"I was going off on a holiday to-day," Joe remarked. "I reckon that 's indefinitely postponed."

"I don't see why," Morris returned. "This is just the time. There won't be much woods-riding done for a week. The men 'll all be busy clearing up the mess."

"Well, I 'll see what Burnam thinks. I want to talk to him anyway," said Joe. "I 've got to find out if this camp is busted or not."

Burnam had come in by the time the riders got back, and Joe found him in his little office in the rear of the commissary-store, bending over a heap of papers and looking worried. The turpentine operator was past middle age, tall, spare, and wiry, burned brown by the Alabama sun. He had spent all his life among the pines, working in turpentine and rosin and lumber; he had a reputation for success and luck and for generosity and for a violent and uncontrollable temper. He had been known to draw a gun on one of his men, threaten him with death, discharge him and be ready to forget it all the next day. He was dressed as he had come in from riding, in flannel shirt and khaki leggings; his soft black hat was pushed on the back of his head, and he met Joe's entrance with a glance of irritation. He was in no smooth temper, but neither was Joe.

"Morris and I have looked over most of the tract, Mr. Burnam," Joe began. "Nearly half the timber looks to be down, or all tangled up. We can save a lot of gum by gathering up the

cups right away, but everything is in bad shape."

Burnam said nothing, but frowned as if he knew this already.

"Is the camp going to go on, or shut down?" Joe ventured.

"That 's my business!" Burnam snapped.

"Mine, too. You 're forgetting that all my money is tied up in this outfit. It was supposed to be a good investment."

"Well, ain't you getting ten per cent. on it?" Burnam demanded.

"Yes—so far. But will I ever get the principal back?"

Burnam gave him a furious glance. For a moment Joe expected one of the turpentine man's famous explosions of rage; but then Burnam leaned back in his seat, took off his hat and put it on the table, and grinned.

"I don't blame you much for being worried, Joe," he said. "You can bet that I 'm worried myself. But I 'll pull through. I 'm going to turpentine the river orchard."

"All right," said Joe, surprised and relieved. "Do you want me to ride it?"

"Sure. I had n't intended to turpentine that

tract, but now I 've got to. I was looking over it this morning, and there 's right smart of good pine there."

"All right," said Joe. "I 'll do the best I can —I 'll work like any nigger—for myself as well as for you."

"I reckon you 'll pull us through, then," returned Burnam, with some dryness. "You were fixing to take a few days off now, I think."

"I was—but of course I won't now," Joe hastened to say. "I would n't leave the camp in this fix."

"No, that 'll be all right. For the rest of this week the men 'll be doing nothing but clearing up fallen timber. You go and visit with your kinfolks for three days if you like; we can spare you as well as not. I can't let you have the car today, but to-morrow 's boat day, and you can ride down to the landing and take your horse with you on the boat."

Joe had no hesitation about accepting this offer. He had been looking forward to seeing his Canadian cousins, and now he particularly wanted to talk to Uncle Louis about the financial prospect. He knew that Burnam would not let

him go unless he could really be well spared, and he thanked the turpentine operator and went out, feeling as if he had been treated with more generosity than he deserved.

The rest of that day he spent with Morris and Wilson, setting the negroes at clearing up the woods, collecting the scattered gum-cups, opening trails for the wagons again, and planning to get what turpentine could still be obtained from the wrecked "orchard."

While he was still at breakfast the next morning he heard the deep roar of the river-steamer's whistle resounding tremendously through the woods. There was no hurry; she was still far away, for her great siren would carry fifteen miles in calm weather; but as soon as he could finish eating he jumped on Snowball and rode at a gallop from the camp and down the road to the landing.

It was three miles to the landing. The road, of yellow sand and clay, had already dried hard since the rain, and it ran between banks of brilliantly-colored clay, vermilion and greenish and white like striped marble. A rivulet of clear water ran on each side of the road, and on each

side rose the vivid green of the pines. As he approached the end he passed through a belt of dense swamp, a tangle of creepers and thorns and titi-shrubs and bay-trees, and then he came in sight of the Alabama River.

There was no wharf, merely a freight warehouse and a cotton-shed at the landing, and three or four men were already there looking out for the boat. The river was a quarter of a mile wide here, running full and strong after the heavy rain, wallowing around its great curves, muddy and opalescent. Down to the water's edge the shores were densely wooded with sycamore and willow and cypress, overrun with yellow jessamine and hung with gray Spanish moss, and, except for the freight-shed, the scene must have been exactly as it had been when the first Spanish explorers came up from the Gulf to look for the fabled Indian treasure-cities.

The steamboat's whistle roared again, perhaps four or five miles away. As Joe rode up to the landing he saw a black object drifting slowly down the river. It was a houseboat—a flatboat with a rough cabin that covered the whole deck, except for a small deck-space at each end. It

was painted or tarred a rusty black; it looked heavy in the water, and it moved sluggishly. A big steering-sweep trailed idly astern, and no one showed his face aboard her.

Joe had seen many such houseboats before. There is a migratory population using them upon all the large rivers of the South; but the somber appearance of this one caught his attention. It looked vaguely sinister to him.

CHAPTER II

OLD DICK'S BEES

THE white bulk of the steamboat came majestically around the bend, puffing pine smoke from her tall double chimneys, and hauled in to the landing. Joe was well known on the boat; Burnam was a heavy shipper of freight, and none of the turpentine men ever paid anything for passage. As he was not going far, there was no difficulty about Snowball's transportation either, and the horse was led aboard and tied among the piles of wood for the furnaces on the lower deck.

There was an hour's wait at the landing, and it was another hour down the winding river to Magnolia, which was the landing for Joe's destination. He went ashore, mounted Snowball again, and rode up the road through swamps and pine woods, till the forests gave place to more and more continuous cultivated fields, and at last he sighted his uncle's plantation.

The great, white, rambling ante-bellum house stood far back from the road, in a grove of oaks and chinaberry-trees. Beyond it were the scattered barns and stables, and farther still the remains of a dozen cabins that had been the slave quarters fifty years ago. As Joe rode in the gate he heard a shot and a shout of laughter. A pretty, brown-haired, bare-headed girl was standing in front of the house, her extended arm still holding a smoking pistol, while two boys were applauding her shot at a paper target pinned to an oak. They all glanced up at the trample of the hoofs, and Joe took off his hat and waved it. He knew at once that these must be his cousins from the far North.

The three young Harmans had arrived in Alabama in February, on a trip of combined business and pleasure. But for the business they would not have come; for it was a long way from their old home at Harman's Corners, Ontario, to these Alabama forests, and they had to plan carefully to stand the expenses of the journey.

Three years before they had been left orphans, inheriting little but debts. Alice, however, had

for some time been a skilful keeper of bees on a small scale, and they had invested all their worldly capital in a large outfit of bees in the wild country of northern Ontario. It had been a rough experience, sometimes a dangerous one; they had had plenty of adventures, and had come more than once within an ace of losing their apiary in the first season, but the venture had been a success. After the second season they had the apiary fully paid for, and the balance at the bank had been a growing source of satisfaction to them.

They had a big crop of honey, and it might have been well if they had been content, but they were tempted by a high cash offer for their bees, and they sold all but fifty hives in the autumn, trusting to be able to replace them at a lower figure before the next season. But this turned out difficult to do. Honey was beginning to rise greatly in price that autumn, and looked as if it would be higher still next year, and nobody had bees for sale. On the contrary, most apiarists wished to buy more, for they expected to coin gold the next summer.

Bitterly regretting their lost bees, the young Harmans searched and advertised without result.

"There 's only one thing to do—get bees from the South," Alice said.

The Southern States, with their mild winters and early springs, have always been a great source of supply for bees for the North. Of late years a great trade has arisen in "pound packages"—a pound or two of bees and a queen, enclosed in a wire-screened box and shipped by express. Such a package of bees, put in a hive and provided with ready-built combs in May, will often build up to a powerful colony and gather as much honey as any wintered-over hive. But on investigation the Harmans found that prices even for Southern pound packages were rising to extravagant figures.

"Why could n't we go down, get some bees, and ship them ourselves?" Bob suggested.

It was the most attractive proposition of all. They wrote to Uncle Louis, whom they had never seen, but who had often invited them to come South and visit him. The letter brought a prompt and cordial reply. They were to come

and spend the whole winter at his plantation. There were "worlds of bees" thereabouts, he said, and they could be bought in that remote place for little or nothing.

That settled the matter. But it was already well toward midwinter, and they were not able to leave immediately. They visited two or three large commercial bee-breeding ranches, spent some weeks in Mobile and along the Gulf, and then voyaged up the river to the plantation.

It was a wonderful and novel experience to them, a new and fascinating world, from the rambling, old-time house, the mules, and the negroes, to the vast pine forests and the black swamps along the river, full of wild turkeys, ducks, wildcats, and moccasin snakes. But so far they had failed to find the "world of bees." Uncle Louis had written too optimistically.

But he gave them a welcome of Southern heartiness, and they enjoyed it all greatly. There were horses to ride, boats to row on the bayou, and game to shoot. Bob had brought his rifle and Carl his shotgun, and Alice had purchased in Mobile the long-barreled target revolver with which they were now practising.

They had been expecting Joe any day, and they knew at once who it must be, at sight of the black horse with the Mexican stirrups, the rifle in its sheath at the saddle, and the boyish rider in dark khaki, with a red tie and creased rough-rider hat. Joe had taken some pains to get himself and his horse up for the occasion, and he rode up and dismounted.

"I know this must be Cousin Alice," he exclaimed, bowing very low over the hand of his cousin, who was a little disconcerted by so much ceremony. It was different from the abrupter manners of the Canadian country-folk.

He shook hands with Bob and Carl, and there was an exchange of greetings, while the cousins all took stock of one another. They were all within two or three years of the same age. Alice had almost exactly the years of Joe. Bob Harman, tall, strongly-built, fair-haired, was the oldest. Carl was the youngest, and his darker complexion recalled his mother, who had come from Alabama twenty years before.

The Harmans liked the looks of their new cousin, and Alice was privately much impressed with his picturesque appearance and his Southern

manner. They had already begun to grow accustomed to the soft Alabama drawl and slurred speech; but Joe at first found difficulty in getting used to the sharper Northern accent.

"Having a little pistol practice?" he said. He shouted loudly for a negro, who presently came and led Snowball away to the stable.

"Try a shot?" Bob suggested. "I expect you can beat us all. Alice bought this pistol in Mobile. She had an idea that she 'd have to carry a gun up here in the wild country."

A few rounds of shooting broke the ice, and they were all presently on the greatest of good terms. They made wild practice, and Joe was no better than any of them.

"I have n't shot much with a pistol for years," he said. "I never tote one. I keep a rifle handy when I 'm riding, for you never know what you might see. I 'll go back and get mine from the saddle, and we 'll try it."

He hastened back to the stable and returned with the weapon. It was a small repeater, shooting a twenty-five caliber smokeless cartridge, light enough for rabbits or turkey, and powerful enough to kill anything in those woods, up to a

bear or a man. They fired a few shots apiece with it at fifty yards. Bob was supposed to be a rifle-shot, but he was far outscored by Joe, who was used to the little rifle, and generally fired off a box of cartridges a week.

Leaving off shooting, they strolled back to the house and sat down on the steps of the wide veranda, overhung with budding honeysuckle. Uncle Louis was somewhere out on the plantation; Aunt Kate, his wife, was busy indoors and the cousins continued to grow better acquainted. Joe gave some account of his work in the turpentine industry.

"But I believe you-all keep bees up in Canada," he said. "That seems funny to me. I would n't think they 'd do any good up there where it 's so cold."

"It 's a better place than down here—for bees, I mean," said Alice. "It is n't as cold as you think. Our summers are shorter than yours, but just as hot. The winters are long, but then the bees are packed up warm and they have a complete rest, while down here they 're flying all the time, and they get worn out quicker."

"Did n't know a bee ever could get worn out,"

said Joe. "But we 've got bees here on the plantation. Did n't Uncle Louis tell you?"

"I believe he did say there were some," said Bob. "He was going to show them to us, but we have not seen them."

"I 'll show 'em to you, if I can find them. I have n't seen them myself for a year, but I reckon they 're still there."

He led the way down past the side of the house to a peach orchard. Up against the fence there was a growth of blackberry-canes, and there, sure enough, was a hum of bees.

The Canadian experts had seen several of these primitive "bee-gums" since coming South, and they had got over the amusement that the first sight had caused them. The hives were boxes about a foot square and three feet high, standing on end, made of rough lumber, and showing a great many cracks and rotted holes, which the industrious insects had plastered up with wax and propolis. From a hole at the bottom the bees came and went, and they were flying now in scores, coming in heavy with honey or with their legs yellow with pollen.

"I expect they 're working on the titi," Bob re-

marked, stooping to watch them. "Or maybe there 's some blackberry coming out in bloom."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Joe. "I did n't suppose you 'd know what titi was. Surely you don't have it up North."

"I would n't know a titi-tree if I saw one," Bob confessed. "But before we came down here I read up about the Alabama honey-plants, and just when they all bloomed, and I know the titi ought to be on just about now. I wish you 'd show me some."

"I reckon you 're a real beeman, all right!" said the woods-rider, laughing. "I never knew there were any books about such things as honey-plants. Down here we just let the bees alone, except when they swarm, and when we rob them. They make honey all right, though. Why, one year I remember we robbed these six gums of pretty near a wash-tubful of honey."

"About sixty pounds, I expect," Bob calculated. "Alice, what did our best hive make last year?"

"Three hundred and eighty pounds," said Alice promptly. "We weighed it separately, just to see how much there was. Our total crop last

year was twenty-one thousand pounds. We sold most of it at eleven cents."

Joe opened his eyes wide and glanced at all three of his cousins to make sure that they were not making fun of him.

"What, more than two thousand dollars, just out of bees?" he gasped. "I never heard of such a thing before. Down here we think bees are just a kind of foolishness. I don't wonder that you are in the business."

"Next year I 'll bet we make four thousand dollars, if we can only get the bees," said Bob. "You see, we were fools. We sold out most of our outfit just when we should have held on. We were offered a big price and we took the bait. So we came down here after more, but I don't know where we are going to get them. All I can hear of is just a few gums like these, scattered here and there; and we want to get a couple of hundred anyway."

"A couple of hundred gums of bees!" mused Joe. "These things take my breath away—they sure do! But I believe you can get them. There 's certainly lots of bees in this country. I 'd help you look for 'em, if I had time. Tell

you what!" he added, remembering something, "you ought to locate Old Dick's bees."

"Old Dick? Who 's that?" Bob inquired.

"Why, Old Dick was a nigger that lived away down in the river swamps somewhere, and he had worlds of bees, they say. A whole yard full of gums. He used to ship his honey down to Mobile on the boat when he robbed them, and they say he once shipped a cake of wax that weighed a hundred pounds."

"I should n't wonder. I expect he got more beeswax than honey," Alice put in. "Well, do you think we could buy his bees."

"The old nigger 's dead. He lived there all alone with his wife and the bees, and at last he died and his wife moved away."

"Then somebody must have taken the bees, too."

"No, according to the story, they were left. Nobody valued bees much, and nobody cared much to fool with Old Dick's bees. They say those were fighting bees. Anyway, the old man died eight or ten years ago, and they say the bees are there yet. Anybody could get 'em that

wanted to take 'em away. Dick did n't have any heirs."

Alice's eyes had grown brighter and brighter during this recital.

"Oh, we must get them!" she exclaimed. "Just think! What a piece of luck! Likely there would be as many as we wanted, and would n't cost us a cent."

"Do you know where they are, Joe?" Bob inquired.

"Have n't the least idea, and I don't believe anybody knows. Dick did n't live on any road nor near anybody else. It was away down in the swamps by the river somewhere—several miles south, I reckon. I never saw anybody that had been to Dick's place. I expect the whole establishment would be grown over with vines and blackberries by this time. But I reckon we ought to be able to locate it if we looked long enough."

"Could n't you go with us? It would be just the sort of expedition we want," asked Carl. "I expect there 'd be game and fish."

"Oh, yes. It 's a mighty rough country down there, where hardly anybody ever goes except

hunters. Lots of quail and turkeys, but the open season for them is over. Might see a bear; lots of them down there, wildcats, too."

"We saw something of wildcats in Canada," said Carl. "We lived in a deserted shanty at our bee-ranch in the woods. I was there alone the first night, and the place was alive with cats—tame cats gone wild, you know. Savage brutes! I shot one, and got all clawed up."

"Bears, too," Bob remarked. "They raided our bee-yards twice. I wonder if they have n't chewed up all Old Dick's bees by this time."

"Well, I don't know," said Joe. "I 'd like first-rate to go on a bee hunt with you, and I 'll do it if I can get a few days off, a little later. In fact, you make me wish I was in bees along with you, instead of the turpentine business. Our camp is going to pieces, I 'm afraid."

"Well, if it does, you can learn honey production," said Alice. "We might keep one lot of bees in Canada and another down here, and be able to work all the year around."

Joe laughed. Bee-keeping still seemed to him a very unsubstantial sort of pursuit; but he had been greatly impressed by what his cousins had

said. If he only had his capital out of Burnam's turpentine business, he said to himself, he would look into the honey business. As it was, he was tied fast and could do nothing, and the mention of the camp recalled his financial perplexities.

That night at supper he asked Uncle Louis what he thought of Burnam's financial status.

"The storm hit him hard," he explained. "Half his orchard is wrecked. He says he 's going to turpentine the river orchard—the old Marshall tract. He owns that, does n't he?"

"I just thought that storm would hit your camp," said Uncle Louis. "It missed us here—blowed down a few trees, but nothing to count. Yes, Burnam owns the old Marshall tract—used to belong to the grandfather of all you young folks—but it 's mortgaged, I know for a fact. Pretty heavy, I reckon." He glanced at Joe anxiously. "Not worrying, are you?" he inquired. "Burnam 'll pull through. But I don't believe I ought to have got your money into his business."

"Oh, well, it was my fault too," returned Joe. "I was wild to get into turpentine then. But now I 'm thinking of going into the bee business."

He laughed as he spoke, and so did his uncle, who made the usual joke about his probably getting stung.

"We 're going to hunt up Old Dick's bees, Uncle Louis," Alice cried. "Joe 's going to help us. Do you know anything about them?"

"Why I 've heard the story," said the planter, much amused. "I know for a fact that the old nigger did have right smart of bee-gums once. What became of 'em after he died I can't say. I don't see why some of 'em should n't be there yet. There 's nothing to kill bees in this country, excepting thieves. Why, I knew an old gum that stood in a fence-corner for ten or twelve years, and nobody ever went near it, and the bees are alive and well now."

"That 's the way you keep bees, too, is n't it, Uncle Louis?" said Alice, slyly.

"We 've got more important things to do with corn and cotton and hogs down here in the South, young lady," said Mr. Marshall. "We don't need to fool with insects."

There was a shout of laughter at this retort, which reduced Alice to silence, but the conversation drifted irresistibly back to the bees. Joe

heard talk of great apiaries, of colonies by the hundred, of tons of honey, of car-loads, indeed, mentioned like ordinary matters, and it filled him with greater and greater amazement. Even Uncle Louis was impressed, though he kept up his air of good-natured ridicule of the whole pursuit.

"But we certainly can't go after Dick's bees unless you go with us, Joe," said Bob. "We don't understand this country; we have to have a guide. Can't you manage it?"

Joe shook his head doubtfully.

"Wish I could. But I 'm afraid Burnam could n't spare me for another vacation just now. But what you-all must do," he added, "is to come up with me, and see the turpentine camp, and the old Marshall place—the old family seat, you know. Nobody 's there now; the old house is rotting down. It won't last much longer."

The young Harmans accepted this proposition with enthusiasm. They all spent three active days on the plantation. They rode, practised with firearms, fished in the bayou and the river, hunted quail and rabbits, and once went out before dawn to stalk a wild-turkey roost—not to shoot, for the game was out of season, but to

give the Northerners a look at the big birds. The cousins became great friends, and at the end of Joe's holiday they all took the boat upstream together for Marshall's Landing, as the place was still called.

From the landing they walked a mile through the woods to see the old house where their parents had been born, paintless now, crumbling and dilapidated. The glass was gone from the windows; there were birds' nests in all the rooms, and a drove of half-wild hogs had made a burrow under the building. Like most deserted houses in the South, it was reputed by the negroes to be haunted.

"Over there is the river orchard, that Burnam owns," said Joe, pointing toward the river. "All this used to belong to our people. They had over a hundred slaves, and used to grow hundreds of bales of cotton in the river-bottoms. I expect they owned ten thousand acres then, but it was mainly timbered, and timber was n't worth anything in those days. Only the bottom-lands were considered any account."

They roamed curiously over the old place with

its relics of flower-beds, its fruit orchard, and its chinaberry and walnut-trees, and then walked back to the landing. A rural telephone connected it with the camp, and Joe rang up the commissary-store and begged for Burnam's car to be sent over, if it was not being used at the moment.

It came in half an hour, and the Harmans drove over to the camp, while Joe rode behind. The turpentine camp was another novel sight to the Northerners, and by good luck the still happened to be working. The men had collected enough gum from the wrecked tract to fill the retort, and they were "running a charge."

Joe had nothing to do with this process, and he explained the operation to his cousins. The heavy barrels of gum were hoisted up to the platform above the furnace and emptied into the great copper retort, together with a certain amount of water. The copper cap was screwed down, and a fire lighted under the retort. Presently a trickle of colorless fluid began to come through the twisted worm of the condenser. It was the turpentine spirit, evaporating more

quickly than water, and this was run off into a barrel, until it ceased and pure water began to come through the pipe.

The turpentine being all out, the negroes opened a gate at the bottom of the retort, letting out a great gush of black, boiling rosin, which ran into a trough, passing through three strainers. Still liquid and intensely hot, it was then ladled out into barrels, where it cooled and hardened, ready to be shipped. This rosin was worth six or seven dollars a barrel, and was a most valuable by-product of the turpentine industry.

All this was an old story to Joe, but it was fresh and exciting to the Canadians. Alice in particular was bubbling with enthusiasm. She made friends at once with the camp foreman and with Burnam himself, who, amused at her intense interest in the camp, conducted her about personally and showed her everything. He insisted that they should stay over at the camp till the next day, when he promised to send them home in his car.

So they stayed, having supper that night at the great table with all the white officers of the camp. Alice was placed in the seat of honor next to Burnam, with whom she was carrying on a

laughing and chaffing dialogue, when she said suddenly:

"Mr. Burnam, I want you to do something for us. We 're going on an exploring trip into the woods soon, for three or four days, and we must have some one with us who knows the country. We want you to let us have Cousin Joe."

"Down here in the South we never refuse anything to a lady," returned the turpentine man. "And when she 's young and pretty like you we give her everything without asking. Sure you can have Joe if you want him."

Alice blushed hotly at this, and Joe, taken by surprise, started to protest.

"No, I 'll be able to spare him for a while, as soon as we get the cups hung and the gum running in the river orchard," Burnam went on more seriously. "Fact is, with half our tract ruined, I don't really need three woods-riders any more. As soon as he gets the new orchard started Morris can look after it for a few days."

"I knew you could fix it!" exclaimed Alice, beaming.

"But he 'll have to work double hard when he gets back, to make up," said Burnam, with affected severity.

CHAPTER III

THE RIVER ORCHARD

THE next morning, after his cousins had departed in Burnam's automobile, Joe rode down to look over the river orchard, feeling considerably more optimistic about the future. Burnam had appeared good-natured and confident; all might yet be well with the camp. The notion of the honey business, too, had taken strong hold on Joe's imagination. He had as yet only the vaguest conception of how it was practised, but as he rode down toward the river he turned over in his mind the astonishing things he had heard from his cousins. Alice had appeared the chief expert. The others always deferred to her opinion when it came to bees; and Joe thought he had never seen a girl so clever, so practical, and so alive with enthusiasm and spirits.

He took the seldom-used road that they had traveled the day before, up past the old Marshall

house, and then by a trail down into the woods of the river orchard. That great tract of pine had a very special interest to Joe, for, as he had explained to the Harmans, it had belonged to their family, he had been born on it himself, and with a little good luck it might have been his own that day.

Before the Civil War it had formed part of the great Marshall estate that lay along the river. The property had been huge in area but of little cash value, for most of it was uncleared and uncultivated. Lumber was of no value then; turpentine was not worth much, though Joe's grandfather had operated a small still somewhere in the woods, shipping turpentine down to Mobile and throwing the rosin away. That had been more than half a century ago, and no one now knew even where the still had been located.

The old-time Marshalls, like many Southern families, had not been thrifty. They sold land recklessly and for a trifle. Joe's own father had inherited not two thousand acres, of which not one-tenth was under cultivation. Joe could remember the series of bad cotton crops, of too wet

summers, of floodings by the river, that had almost ruined his father. At last, weary of hard luck, Mr. Marshall had sold the whole property for six dollars an acre, and moved to Mobile.

No one moved into the old mansion, which fell into decay. The new owner lived forty miles distant. He rented out part of the land, let out part to be farmed for him on shares, and sold to Burnam the tract of pine land toward the river.

When Joe was fifteen his father had died. The boy had neither sisters nor brothers, and his mother had been dead eight years. Almost his only link with humanity was his uncle Louis Marshall, and the negro boy Sam, who had come to Mobile with the family.

Joe had inherited three thousand dollars—all that was left of the once splendid Marshall property. He was graduated shortly afterwards from the Mobile Academy, and became much attracted by the turpentine business. He did not care for the city; he had been brought up in the woods, and they called to him. When Uncle Louis, who was trustee of his money, mentioned that he might put it into Burnam's new camp, with the additional inducement of a job as woods-

rider at seventy-five dollars a month, the boy was enthusiastic. It was as much his fault as Uncle Louis's that the proposition had been accepted. Sam was also wild with delight. Since Mr. Marshall's death he had been working in a wholesale warehouse, but he remained at heart, as he said, "a piney-woods nigger," and he took it for granted that he was to go into turpentining with his young master.

Burnam had leased the tract for the usual three years. It is not considered profitable to work the same pine for a longer term. The first summer all had gone well; the big still had been working twice a week, and almost weekly the river boat had carried a cargo of turpentine and rosin barrels down to Mobile. The second season had also started with great promise, but now the storm had dealt it a staggering blow.

However, to turpentine the river orchard might save the situation. Joe rode observantly through the woods, growing more hopeful as he estimated the number of pines. There must be, he decided, three or four "crops," of about ten thousand trees each, and the trees were vigorous and well grown. The river acres might, after

all, compensate for the damage that the tornado had done to the rest of the tract; for down by the river the wind seemed to have worked little injury. Few trees had fallen except dead ones, which were useless anyway.

For years this tract of woods had not been much visited. It was badly grown up with blackberry-thickets and underbrush, and would need a great deal of clearing out before turpentining could be fairly started. Quail rose occasionally from open glades; rabbits scurried away almost from under Snowball's hoofs, and once the horse stopped, snorting and scared, afraid to advance. A small rattlesnake was coiled right in the path, refusing to move. It vibrated its two-buttoned tail with an almost imperceptible sound, and Joe had to ride around it. In the moist earth of a creek-bottom he perceived a track much resembling that of a bear, and it made him think of the proposed camping expedition with his cousins. He might be able to make it within a week, and he reminded himself to inquire among the negroes if any of them knew the location of Old Dick's cabin.

Joe was feeling more cheerful as he rode back

to the camp, late for the dinner-hour, but he got a reminder at once of the precarious position. It was Saturday; it was pay-day, but Joe had quite forgotten this fact until he saw the crowd of negroes lounging and waiting outside the commissary-store. They were waiting to get their wages, which they would immediately spend over the counter again for pork and meal and molasses and calico and tobacco. Prices were high at the commissary, too, and it was not the least profitable part of the camp.

But no money was going yet, though it was long past the usual hour. Joe dismounted and went into the store. The cashier's window was closed; there was a sound of talking in Burnam's inner office. Joe saw anxiety on the black faces, and overheard a scrap of talk between two "chippers," who were planning to leave for another camp. There seemed to be a general impression that Burnam's business was bankrupt.

Joe saw to his horse being put away, and returned to the store. For the first time he noticed a muddy automobile, a strange one, standing on the road. Tom Morris presently came up and joined him.

"They 're fighting it out in the office," he observed. "A fellow from the bank came over in that car this morning, and he 's been in there ever since, arguing with Burnam, I reckon. I don't know whether he brought over the cash for the pay-roll or not. We 'll soon see now if the bank 's going to carry us any longer."

It must have been a hard battle, for the office remained closed for nearly an hour more. Burnam came out, looking worried, and called for Wilson, who entered the conference. Finally the bank man came out, got into his car, and drove away. All the waiting camp was tense with expectation, but Burnam had won this time. Within five minutes the cashier opened his wicket and began to pay the men.

As soon as he could see Burnam, Joe made his detailed report on the river tract and got his instructions. Work was to be started as quickly as it possibly could, with all the negroes that could be spared from the other orchards; and early next morning Joe went down with three wagon-loads of men to clean up the woods.

As he had foreseen, it was a heavy job. The negroes cut down the dense blackberry-thickets,

raked away the pine-needles and chips from the trees that were to be tapped, piled up the brush-wood, and cut trails for the wagons. Fire is the most terrible of perils in a turpentine forest, and the first duty is always to clear up all inflammable rubbish.

There were occasional bits of excitement as the work went on. Rabbits bobbed out from under the brush-heaps; the negroes killed two or three with clubs. Once they disturbed a nesting wild turkey on an oak ridge. Snakes of all sorts were plentiful; one of the men killed a large kingsnake in a blackberry-thicket. A little later Joe was attracted by a great uproar of whoops and shouting. The negroes had driven an enormous diamond-back rattlesnake out of its lair, and were gathered round it at a respectful distance, laughing and daring one another to approach it. The serpent lay coiled, with the tip of its buzzing tail lifted, and its flat, sinister head turned grimly toward its enemies. It would not run, it was ready to fight, but no one cared to encounter it, till Joe drew the little rifle from its sheath at his saddle. He missed the first shot, but the second bullet went through the snake's head. The men shouted and

cheered, and when the serpent ceased to struggle one of them cut off its rattles and brought them to Joe. There were eight and a button; and he put them in his pocket, thinking of a curiosity for his cousins.

One day's work cleared up a good many acres. While the cleaning gang moved on to a fresh area the next day, a second gang came down from the camp to chip and "stick tin" on the prepared ground. The new men worked in pairs, one carrying the hack and the other the cups and the tin gutters. While the first ripped a broad, V-shaped gash in the pine-bark with his keen tool, the second fixed the two gutters in place, and hung the cup under them on a nail. These men were expert "turpentine niggers"; they worked fast, and by night several thousand trees were beginning to drip gum.

Meanwhile more of the woods had been cleared up and was ready to be tapped. Joe drove the men to their utmost efforts; and they worked valiantly. In three days the whole orchard was cleaned up and cut with trails, and most of the chipping was done. Burnam came over and rode rapidly through, going away without say-

ing anything, but Joe knew that he was pleased. The river tract gang had made the biggest week's wages of their lives, and Joe thought with some apprehension of the Saturday pay bill; but the cashier opened his wicket punctually this time, and the commissary did a roaring trade for the rest of the day. Evidently the bank had not yet shut down on Burnam.

By the first of the next week all the tin was stuck and the cups hung in the new tract. The weather had been unusually hot and there had been a wonderful run of gum for so early in the season, but now a sudden cold wave came over. The nights were chilly; fires blazed in all the negro cabins, and the gum ceased to trickle.

It was another piece of hard luck. There would be no more flow until the weather turned hot again, and the cold wave was overspreading the whole country, with no prospect of immediate change. There was not much to do in the woods. Joe rode mechanically, thinking that it was a great opportunity for his promised holiday, but he disliked reminding Burnam of his promise.

The pine woods lay well back from the river, and Joe seldom went down to the water, but to-

day Snowball broke loose during the noon-hour and wandered toward the bottom lands, probably in search of better grazing than he could find among the pines. Joe did not discover it for half an hour, and it took him some time to find and catch the horse. He was riding along the shore when he was startled to notice the marks on the bank where a large boat had been tied up. There were the ashes of a camp-fire ashore, too, scattered pork bones, a broken bottle, and several scraps of cloth. Evidently some of the river nomads had camped there, and Joe at once remembered the black houseboat that he had seen floating down past the landing. It could not have been that one, however, for it was gone never to return. Such houseboats have no means of propulsion, and cannot return against the stream without being towed.

The camp looked several days old, and it was a matter of no particular importance. Joe went back to the orchard, glancing into the turpentine-cups that still hung unfilled, and was astonished to meet Burnam at the upper end of the range.

"Getting any gum, Marshall?" he inquired.

"Not a drop since the cold spell," returned Joe drearily.

"Well, never mind!" said Burnam. "It 's bound to turn warm again. But everything 's dead just now, and I reckon this is just the time to send you down to that pretty cousin of yours. Want to go?"

"Well—as you say, there is n't much to do," said Joe. "If I 'm going to take a holiday, this is the time for it."

"All right," said the operator. "You 've done a big week's work here, and you deserve it. Wilson 'll drive you down in my car in the morning. Tell your cousin that I 've kept my promise, and that you 've got to bring her up to visit us again."

CHAPTER IV.

DISAPPOINTMENT

JOE had already made many inquiries among the turpentine negroes about Old Dick's bees, but had not obtained any definite information. Everybody had heard the story; Dick's bees had become legendary in that district, but nobody seemed to have any idea where they had been situated. They were certainly somewhere down the river, and, most agreed, on the other side, but estimates of the distance ranged from five to fifty miles. One man declared Old Dick had dwelt in the River Island, a tangled and almost unknown swamp thirty miles down the stream; but this was highly improbable. He hoped that his cousins had been able to learn something more accurate; but in reality he had very little idea that they would ever be able to find the old negro's apiary, or that they could do anything with it if they did.

Joe's arrival was unexpected, but he got a great welcome. The Harmans had been active during his absence. They had walked and driven about the country with characteristic energy, and had discovered about thirty "gums" of bees which the owners were willing to sell at prices of seventy-five cents or a dollar apiece. It was not many, but these bees would be better than nothing. They had also made assiduous inquiries about Old Dick, but had been little more successful than Joe.

"They all say he lived quite close to the river," said Alice. "He used to send away his wax and honey on the steamboat. And it seems he lived near a big bayou opening off the river. Some say it was ten miles down, and some say twenty."

"There must be only a limited number of big bayous between ten and twenty miles from here," said Bob. "Seems to me we might look into them all, if necessary."

Joe laughed. He knew the wild and impenetrable nature of that bayou country, which his cousins had little idea of. He was ready for the trip all the same. The Harmans had already

made a rough scheme for it, and their plans took shape as they talked.

Of course they would have to go by water, and fortunately Uncle Louis owned a good boat at the landing, which he put at their service. He also had a small shelter-tent, and he told them to help themselves to all the grub and cooking-utensils they could find about the place.

"But supposing we do find the bees, Uncle Louis," Alice asked, "who do they belong to? Would we be allowed to have them?"

"Who 's to stop you?" returned the planter. "The law is that bees become wild animals when nobody 's keeping them. Anybody can take them, same 's a bee-tree. Besides, I know all the land-owners from here to Mobile, and I could fix it. No, you-all find your bees, and raft 'em off, and you can have 'em all right. You 'll sure deserve them."

"There might be a hundred gums there," said Alice optimistically. "We could extract the honey and melt up the wax, and drive all the bees into wire-cloth cages, and express them home. Just think what a crop they 'd make for us on the Ontario clover!"

"And think of all the wax we 'd get from the old gums!" said Carl, with equal enthusiasm. "Two or three pounds to the gum and it 's worth fifty cents now."

"But of course you 're not thinking of going on this hunt with us, Allie," said Bob. "You could n't go. It would be much too rough a trip for you, through the swamps. Would n't it, Joe?"

"Too rough!" cried his sister indignantly. "I guess it won't be any rougher than our first season in the north woods, with bears and thieves and forest fires. As if I could n't go anywhere you could! What do you think I came South for? I should rather think I am going!"

"Surely she can go," Joe put in. "There won't be any danger."

Bob only laughed. He knew well that Alice could not be kept out of any such adventure, and in fact she was as capable of traveling through the wilderness as either of her brothers. Probably he would have objected strongly to leaving her behind, indeed, for she was a great expert in camp cookery.

As they expected to be out only three or four

days they did not need a heavy outfit. Joe had brought his rifle, his cousins their own fire-arms, including Alice's pistol, which she wore strapped around her waist in a belt of cartridges. They had fishing-tackle, and they carried several loaves of fresh-baked "light-bread," with pork, corn-meal, and a large number of hard-boiled eggs. One of the plantation mule wagons carried them and their equipment down to Magnolia Landing early the next morning, and they embarked aboard the boat and started down the big river.

For two hours they went on, rowing and floating with the current, round bend after bend of the twisting stream, banked on each side with the incessant swamps and forests. Occasionally there was a bottom-land patch of corn; occasionally a glimpse of low pasture where scrawny and half-wild cattle were grazing.

"What a different country from Canada!" Alice remarked.

All the Harmans had been secretly impressed with the desolation of the scene, the pitiful farming, the dwarfed cattle, so different from the great Holsteins and Herefords of the Ontario

clover-pastures; but they had been too polite to voice their impressions to Joe.

"Yes, this is no country for farming," Joe admitted. "Land too poor, I reckon. It 's a turpentine and timber country. What they 'll do when the pine is all cut off I can't imagine. But this sand strip along the river is the very worst bit of the State. North and east of here you 'll see as fine plantations as anywhere in the world."

"But this is a great country for cheap bees," said Bob, "and that 's the main thing just now. When do you suppose we're coming to that big bayou?"

Joe thought they must have come six or eight miles, and within another mile a wide opening did appear on the other shore of the river. They pushed the boat into it with great hopes. On either side it was tangled with dense cypress and sycamore and cotton wood, heavy-laden with gray Spanish moss, but within fifty yards it shoaled off into a morass of liquid mud."

"This certainly is n't it," said Carl, contemplating the depressing spectacle.

"No, Old Dick never lived here," Joe admitted. "Well, there are plenty more bayous to look at."

As they returned to the river the steamboat passed, coming up from Mobile, and blew a deafening blast from her whistle as they waved at her from the rowboat. It was the first human life they had seen since leaving the landing.

As Joe had said, there were plenty more bayous and creeks. For a while it seemed that there was a fresh one every hundred yards. Some of them proved choked and impassable with fallen timber; some were too shallow to navigate far; once they got far in and became involved in a maze of backwater channels, shut in by thickets of titi and bay-trees, tangled with rattan and bamboo-vine. Moccasin snakes popped into the sluggish waters; birds strange to the Canadians shrieked discordantly overhead; lizards darted up and down the tree-trunks; but there was no spot where a cabin had ever stood, nor anything resembling a bee-yard.

Growing very tired of being cramped in the boat, they went ashore after another quarter of a mile down-stream, where the land seemed unusually high and dry. It was "hammock land," only occasionally overflowed by high

water, wooded with black-gum and bay-trees, and the moist earth bore dense clumps of palmetto. Through this they walked inland till they came to still higher pine woods, then circled around to the left till they came back to the river again, without having seen anything encouraging.

"I suppose we might as well have dinner," Joe suggested. "This treasure-hunting is hungry work."

They lunched plentifully, though simply, on bread and butter and cold boiled eggs, without lighting a fire. There was plenty of drinking water in the river; it looked muddy indeed, but Joe assured them that it was perfectly wholesome. There was not much inducement to linger after they had finished eating. The air of the hammock woods was damp and chilly, deeply shaded from the sun, and they got into the boat and floated down the river again.

All that afternoon they spent in the same fruitless exploration of swamp and creek-mouth and bayou. Wherever the shores looked reasonably dry they landed and searched up and down and half a mile inland, but found nothing that even suggested a deserted cabin. They found the plain

tracks of a drove of wild turkeys in the damp soil; they could have shot plenty of quail, but these birds were out of season, and they had provisions enough not to be in need of game. Carl took to fishing from the boat, and landed three or four "yellow cats," differing greatly from the Northern catfish, which they reserved for supper. Persevering in his angling, Carl presently hooked something that took out all his line, something living that nevertheless hung like a dead weight of hundreds of pounds on the hook. Carl had the end of the line injudiciously tied around his wrist; the skin under the loop turned purple, and he was nearly pulled overboard with the strain.

Joe snatched out his knife and cut the line. Carl sunk back, not yet over his surprise.

"What on earth was it?" he gasped. "An alligator?"

"Likely a big catfish," said Joe laughing. "They get mighty big in the Alabama—sometimes over a hundred pounds. You can't land one of those fellows on a line, but it is n't often they take a bait. He 'd have pulled you over if you 'd held on."

Recovering from his shock, Carl presently

resumed fishing, but he hooked no more dangerous monsters. The smaller catfish, of a pound or two, were plentiful enough, but Alice looked upon them with some aversion.

"I can cook trout better than anybody in the world," she declared modestly. "But I don't know whether I can do anything with these creatures."

They turned out excellent that night, however, fried with slices of bacon, and Alice also produced a pan of fresh hoe-cake—an accomplishment which she had acquired during her stay at the plantation. They had coffee, too, and more eggs, and a jar of fig-preserves which Aunt Kate had slipped among the more substantial provisions.

A damp fog had fallen on the river and the swamps, and felt intensely cold. They were on a strip of high land a hundred yards back from the water, but the air seemed impregnated with vapor. They built up the fire to a great blaze with dry pine and cypress, like a Canadian camp, Bob said, and they sat beside it until Alice, declaring that she was tired, went to her tent in the background.

The three boys piled fresh wood on the fire and rolled up in their blankets in the warmth. They were all rather depressed and disinclined to talk much. The exploring trip was turning out disappointingly. Joe had a sense of guilt. It was he who had first suggested finding the lost bee-yard, and his cousins were neither finding any bees nor having any sport. He was losing what faith he had ever had in Old Dick, and he made up his mind that if they had no success on the morrow they had better go home. He would help them to find gums among the farmers. Meanwhile he would organize some amusements —a grand 'possum and coon hunt. In the midst of these schemes he fell asleep.

But in the morning they all felt more cheerful, after plenty of fried ham, hot coffee, and corn-bread. It was clear and sunny; a mocking-bird sang gloriously from a bay-tree overhead, and it had turned warmer. The cold wave seemed to be broken.

"The gum 'll be running again in a day or two if it turns warm, and they 'll be wanting me back at the camp," Joe remarked.

"Perhaps we 'd better go back to-morrow,"

said Alice. "But I have a feeling that something is going to happen to-day."

Something did happen, which came within a hair's-breadth of turning into a tragedy. They floated down the river after breakfast, explored one creek-mouth after another, landed several times, always with the same discouraging failure to find any deserted cabin. About noon they rowed into a broad, shallow bayou and landed to explore in different directions, Joe following the bayou upwards, Bob up the river shore, and Carl in a midway direction. Alice elected to stay with the boat. She did not care to walk, and she had a belief that if she sat quietly by the bayou she might see an alligator, for which purpose she borrowed Joe's rifle.

Joe wandered up the swampy shore of the bayou for nearly a mile, when it dwindled away into a small creek. He diverged into a tract of hammock land, circled through this for some time, crossed the head of the bayou, and came down on the other side.

Approaching the river eventually, he saw the boat drawn up on the shore opposite him, but Alice was nowhere in sight. He shouted several

times; he wanted to be ferried across; but there was no answer. He became slightly uneasy, though he could not think of any real danger. Probably, he thought, she was ambushed by the river out of hearing, on the watch for an alligator; but when he could get no response to his shouting he determined to wade the bayou.

He did not think there was more than two or three feet of water in it, and he splashed in without hesitation. The bottom was soft sand and mud, and he had to step quickly to keep from sinking in it. It gave him a slight sense of uneasiness, but in his anxiety to get across he waded ahead till he was near the center of the bayou.

Then one foot suddenly went down in the mud far over the ankle. He stumbled and tried to pull it out, and the other foot went even deeper. Instantly realizing his danger, he threw himself forward in the water and tried to swim, but he failed to pull himself free; he went under, gasping; he endeavored to get back to his balance, and found that his legs were down almost to the knees in the loose, apparently bottomless sandy mud.

Joe knew the peril of these treacherous sloughs, where hogs and cattle are frequently engulfed, and, rarely, a human being. He struggled to free himself; he tried to trample his way up. But the stuff was thick enough to hold him, not thick enough to afford any purchase, and his efforts seemed only to sink him deeper.

He stood still and shouted again at the top of his voice. He could hear the echo far over the swamp, but there was no answer. The surface of the water was rising well over his waist; it was creeping up with frightful speed.

The boat lay there, not a hundred feet away. He could see the tin bucket in it, and the rolled-up tent and blankets. It seemed incredible that he could not reach it. He tried again to wallow forward.

His efforts carried him down. Throwing his weight well on one foot sank it deeper. He was down almost hip-deep in the mud; the water was rising over his chest.

Afraid now to stir, he stood still and shouted again and again. A deadly chill seemed to be creeping up from his legs. His feet felt numb and paralyzed. He felt the slow, terrible sink-

ing, as if some malignant force had him by the feet.

From somewhere very far away he thought he heard one of the boys answer his yell—or was it only the echo? The water was muddy all around him, torn up by his struggles. The turbid ripples lapped his throat, rising to his chin. In wild terror, he realized that drowning now was only a matter of moments, and at that instant Alice ran out of the woods, still carrying his rifle.

He saw her laugh at her first glimpse of his head and waving arms above the surface, then the laugh suddenly froze on her face. She dropped the gun, leaped into the boat, and sent it shooting toward him.

The side rasped his shoulder, and he clutched it, as she gripped his arm and tried to raise him, supposing he was merely out of his depth and unable to swim. He threw his head back, just able to clear his mouth.

"Mud! Quicksand!" he ejaculated.

He caught a mouthful of water and seemed to go suddenly down half a foot at once. Alice's pull was unable to lift him. The muddy water

went over his mouth, over his nose. It closed over his nose. It closed over his eyes, and he held his breath, still clutching uselessly on the boat above him.

He held that breath till his lungs felt about to burst. Alice let go her grip on his shoulder. He could feel the water going over his head, roaring and dashing, he thought. Then something struck his head. The water seemed strangely to disappear from his face. Involuntarily he let go the air in his lungs; he drew another breath with a gasp, and opened his eyes.

A tin surface was around his face, enclosing air and not water. He vaguely recognized the big bucket they had carried in the canoe. It had been pushed down over his head, the contained air driving the water down before it.

The fresh air cleared his head as he caught another gasp. It seemed a miracle to him, incomprehensible, but he realized that he was safe —at any rate for some minutes. He could feel himself still sinking; it could be for only some minutes that he was respited.

He tried to pull himself up by the boat, but it only tilted and gave, without producing any

effect. Alice seemed to be holding the bucket over his head with one hand, while she was patting his arm encouragingly with the other.

She tapped on the tin as if for warning, and he felt it slowly withdrawn. He held his breath, and in a moment it was replaced, with changed air. It was time; he was choking again, for there were not many lungfuls of air in that bucket.

Through the water he thought he heard a sound of voices. Alice took both his hands and put them on the bucket. He would have to hold it himself. He grasped it, and felt the swirl of the water as the boat started away.

He felt deserted. An endless time seemed to pass. The air in the bucket was growing foul and suffocating again, when the water heaved and the boat's keel scraped over his shoulder. His arms were gripped; there was a tug and strain that seemed likely to tear him in two; and then he came up, trailing behind the boat. Alice and Carl had him by the arms, while Bob was putting all his strength into the oars.

Without stopping to take him into the boat, they towed him straight across the bayou and

pulled him out on the bank. The woods-rider crumbled down in a collapsed heap. He rubbed the water out of his eyes and looked at his rescuers.

"Alice," he said rather thickly, "you surely saved my life. I—I 'll never forget this."

"Oh, Joe!" said Alice, and burst into weeping.

"Hold on, Allie! It 's all right now!" exclaimed Bob.

"That bucket trick was the cleverest thing I ever saw," said Carl.

"How did you come to think of it?" asked Joe.

"I d-don't know," Alice quavered, wiping her eyes. "It came to me like a flash. I 'd read of it somewhere—that you could shove a bucket down over the head of a drowning man, and it would hold the air—like a diving-bell, you know."

"You thought of it just in time," said Joe. "I 'd taken my last breath, I thought. I ought to have had more sense than to wade into that place, but I never thought of any sort of quicksand. You did n't see any alligators, did you, Alice?" he added hastily, as the girl showed some symptoms of renewed tears.

"N-no," said Alice. "I thought I saw one,

and I watched it a l-long time, but it was only a l-log. I was away up the river; that 's why I did n't hear you sooner. I ran as soon as I heard you. The boys were just coming back, too. This is an awful place. Let 's go away from it."

The muddy bayou did look sinister and depressing to all of them since it had shown itself to be a death-trap; and they got aboard the boat and drifted down-stream again. Joe felt in no condition for exploring; he felt weak and used up, chilled to the bone and shivering, though the bayou water had not been cold. Within a quarter of a mile they landed on a high bit of shore, and Joe stretched himself in the full sunshine, now scorching hot, to dry his clothes and and warm the chill out of his body.

Bob and Carl took their guns and went exploring after eating dinner, but Joe stayed where he was, soaking in the sun, and Alice stayed to keep him company. As the hot sun baked him through he felt better, and the horror of his recent adventure began to wear off. It had left him with a tremendous admiration for Alice's pluck and ingenuity, however. This was the first

occasion when he had been alone with her for any length of time; and he tried to amuse her with stories of the river country, of the great swamps, bears and alligators, outlaw negroes and half-wild houseboat-men who dwelt on the river. Adventures were no novelty to Alice, however, and she replied with tales of the great north woods, and their narrow escapes in establishing an apiary in the wild raspberry country. When she talked of the bees she always became enthusiastic, and she explained something to Joe of modern apiary methods, of which he was profoundly ignorant.

"Do you know, Alice?" he said with sudden candor, "I don't believe we 're ever going to locate Old Dick's place."

She laughed.

"I 've been thinking the same myself," she admitted. "I 'm sorry, too. However, I guess we can gather up some hives—gums, I mean—around the country, and if there are n't enough to ship now, we can do better next spring.

"Then you 'll come back next spring!" Joe exclaimed. "Good! I 'll look after your bees for you through the winter, and next spring I

may be able to locate a lot more. And perhaps I can put some money into the thing myself, if Burnam's camp does n't go bust. And if it does I 'm going to get my money out of him anyway, if I have to seize the still. That is, if you-all would like me for a partner," he added, doubtfully.

"Of course, we 'd like to have you, Joe," returned Alice frankly. "Why, the four of us could handle—oh, so many bees! Maybe a thoussand colonies. I know two men who run six hundred between them. There are places up North where they pay profits of ten or fifteen dollars a colony. Think of the money we 'd make! But it would cost a lot to get a thousand hives of bees, unless we could get them cheaply here in the South and ship them."

They talked the matter over for a long time. The two boys came back, rested, and went off again in a different direction. They had no luck. The sun grew low. This was not a suitable spot for camping, as there seemed to be no dry wood within reach, and they took to the boat, landing again at a more promising spot a mile lower. Here they unpacked the provisions, greatly reduced now, and set up the tent.

"Our last camp. To-morrow we 'll be out of grub and have to go home," Bob remarked. "I don't care much. No offense to you, Joe, but I don't think your country is as good as the North for a camping trip."

"This is n't a camping trip; this is a bee-hunt," Joe defended. "This is n't the time of the year for camping, of course. The swamps are wet, and there 's nothing to shoot, and the snakes are out. You ought to come in January; then you could have the trip of your life, and all the shooting you wanted."

"But the worst failure is the bees," said Carl, poking the fire with a cypress pole. "I don't believe there ever was any Old Dick. It 's all a myth."

"Well, don't poke so much," said Alice, who was manipulating the frying-pan. "If there are n't Old Dick's bees, there are others. Joe is going to hunt up gums for us."

"I sure will," said Joe. "But there was an Old Dick once, all right. His bees may have melted away, though. Maybe he never had so many as folks said. Lots of things might have happened to them. Bears may have eaten 'em up—they

may have got burned, or stolen. Or they just naturally died. Bees do die sometimes, don't they?"

"I expect some niggers stole the honey, and the bees starved to death," Bob suggested shrewdly. "Anyhow, I don't think it would be worth while to look much more, even if we were n't out of grub."

There was grub enough for that night and for breakfast, with a little for a bite on the way home. They sat about the camp for some time next morning, reluctant to start. It had not been a very pleasurable or successful trip, but it was rather hard to call it over, and start on the fifteen mile row up-stream to Magnolia Landing.

Carl picked up Joe's rifle and started up the bank, trying rather half-heartedly to get a shot at a gray squirrel in a gum-tree. He disappeared through the thicket, and a few minutes afterwards they heard him calling. He was standing at the foot of a dead black-gum, looking upward.

"Bees!" he exclaimed, as they approached.

"Only a bee-tree!" said Alice in disappointment, at the first glance.

Twenty feet up, there was a dense cloud of fly-

ing insects about a small hole in the trunk. They were coming and going in much excitement, and the loud roar of their wings sounded plainly on the ground.

"But what 's stirring them up so?" said Bob, puzzled. "Can't be swarming at this time of year."

"No, they 're robbing—they 're fighting!" cried Alice. "This bee-tree is being robbed out by some other wild bees—or—"

Carl uttered a yell.

"Old Dick's bees! Where are they coming from?"

From the bee-tree they could see the insects coming and going in a direct line over the woods toward the north.

"Follow them! Track them down!" Bob exclaimed.

They all started at a run along the line of the bees' flight. Once they had the direction, they had only to keep on, for bees fly in a proverbially straight line. They went down a slope, crossed a little creek in a belt of titi thickets, up another slope, and then Bob in the lead uttered a whoop of triumph.

There before them, between two great magnolias, stood the wreck of a small board cabin. Windowless and doorless, it looked a long-deserted ruin. A tumbling log outhouse stood near, and there were surviving indications of a fence.

"Old Dick's cabin, for sure!" exclaimed Carl. "And there 's the bees!"

At one end of the cabin stood three "gums," made of sections of a hollow log, about three feet long and standing on end. The top was covered with a piece of plank, and through the rotted entrance-hole at the bottom excited streams of bees were flying and entering. Two more gums showed no activity and were evidently dead; and several more lay overturned and empty.

"But where 's the enormous gum-apiary?" cried Alice.

The bees in the gums, wild and jet-black, were cross and inclined to attack. The party kept well away from them and searched all through the blackberry thickets and undergrowth, at first with full expectation, then with failing hopes,

and at last with disgust. There were no more bees than the three colonies they had first seen.

"So much for Old Dick's hundreds of gums!" said Bob. "Another legend busted!"

Alice gazed at the disappointing result of their search, and then began to laugh.

"Rather a joke, is n't it?" she said. "After all our expectations!"

"Afraid that 's just what it is," said Joe. "This is probably Old Dick's shack, all right. These hollow-log gums are just what the Old nigger is said to have used. Probably some of them were stolen, some died, and likely he never did have many. Those niggers' stories are apt to be awfully exaggerated."

"Well," said Bob, after they had looked for some time at the gums, "there 's no use in staying any longer, is there? Unless you want to carry these gums home in the boat."

Nobody expressed any desire to undertake this, and, after another look about the cabin, they tramped back to the river.

"And now for home!" said Carl. Never mind! When we came South we did n't know anything

about Old Dick, and we 've still got all the country to look for bees in."

They packed the outfit and turned the boat upstream. It was a long, hard pull against the current, under a hot sun, and it was well after noon when they arrived at Magnolia Landing. Leaving the camp kit to be brought over by wagon, they tramped up the road, meeting Uncle Louis on horseback within half a mile of home.

"Hello! I was looking for you back," he cried. "Did you find Old Dick's bees?"

"Oh, yes, we found 'em!" returned Joe, sadly.

CHAPTER V

BURIED TREASURE

JOE got back to Burnam's camp to find gum running freely again. Morris, who had been riding the river orchard in his absence, reported that everything looked promising, and Joe found it so when he rode over the woods on the day after his return. The negroes were glad to have him back; they saluted him delightedly. Sam said that the gum might be dipped in two more hot days, and Joe began to feel much more confident of the camp's future.

But the next morning there was a different story. He was a little later than usual in arriving at the woods, and when he turned into the pines he found his whole gang of chippers collected and waiting for him.

"What 's the matter? Why are n't you boys at work?" he exclaimed.

"Capt'n, somebody 's done emptied our cups," said one of the negroes, solemnly.

"What! Stealing gum!" cried Joe. He had heard of thefts of raw gum from turpentine tracts before. The stuff is marketable, and can be sold at any still.

"If any of you have been robbing the cups, I 'll put you where you 'll never steal any more," he threatened.

"No, suh, capt'n! No, suh, Mr. Joe!" declared the man. "Ain't none of dis gang would n't steal gum. An' de cups is gone, too."

"Somep'n queer 'bout dis yere, capt'n!" chimed in another chipper.

Joe's eye lighted on Sam, standing rather sheepishly in the rear.

"Sam, what 's happened? What 's the matter with this gang?" he called.

"Spects dey 's scared, Mr. Joe. Scared of spirits, I reckon."

"Yes, suh, capt 'n!" said another, gaining courage to speak out. "Some of our boys was down yere one night huntin' 'possums, an' dey seed mighty queer things—yessuh, powerful queer. Dere was queer lights movin' round dis way, dat way, an' people travelin' 'bout. But,

capt'n, dem ware n't no real lights, an' dem ware n't no real human men."

"Everybody knows dat ol' Marshall place is full of ha'nts!" another chipper muttered.

"What nonsense!" cried Joe. "Come, let 's see where the cups were robbed."

They did not have to go far. From one of the first pines in the orchard the cup was missing. In its place, a red cord with a piece of black cloth and a severed chicken's head hanging from it had been tied around the tree.

"What foolishness is this?" exclaimed Joe angrily, tearing down the mysterious red decoration.

None of the men replied. They shuffled their feet and looked stealthily at one another. Even Sam looked furtive. No white man ever quite fathoms a negro's superstition. What the red string meant the turpentine workers did not know themselves, but it stirred in them dim, barbaric ideas of voodoo and conjuring, and they were desperately afraid of it.

"Some one's been trying to scare you," said Joe. "Ghosts don't steal gum, do they? Spirits! Spirits of turpentine, I reckon!"

It was a rather feeble joke, but a little joke goes a long way with negroes, and they all laughed uproariously. They brightened up at once, and under the protection of the white man's presence, they ventured into the woods. For some distance Joe found no more cups missing; but as he rode on he began to find more and more robbed trees, and soon he came to a tract where hardly a cup remained. There were no more red strings, however.

The theft of the gum was not very important, but the loss of the galvanized cups was a much more serious matter. So many of Burnam's cups had been crushed in the wreck of the storm that the supply of extra ones was low. They were expensive now, and, worse still, it would take a week or two to get a fresh shipment.

He sent a man to camp with a note to the foreman, requesting him to send down two hundred cups, and he shepherded the chippers back to their work. They went reluctantly and showed a disposition to keep together, and Joe had to follow them closely all day. A little before noon a wagon came with the cups, and Burnam came with it, in great indignation.

"Won't do to have this happen again," he said. "These are about the last cups in the camp. Find any trace of who did it?"

There seemed to be no trace. The two of them searched the woods for several hours, without finding how the cups had been taken. The smooth carpet of pine-needles showed no track of wheels or hoofs, and yet so many cups could hardly have been carried away by hand.

It was only after Burnam had gone that Joe came upon a clue. He discovered a single wheel-mark in the damp earth near the creek swamp—apparently the track of a wheelbarrow. It seemed to have passed that way several times, and the track did not appear to lead toward that part of the woods where the cups had been taken, yet there could be hardly any doubt that the thieves had used the barrow for transporting the stolen gum.

Within a hundred feet he lost the trail on the smooth pine litter. He searched the woods in widening circles, scrutinizing every spot of soft ground. He was lucky enough to pick up the trail again a hundred yards away; lost it, found it again, and within half an hour more he came

upon the wheelbarrow itself, cunningly hidden under a dense gallberry-thicket.

The implement was smeared with unmistakable, telltale marks of gum and rosin. Joe was about to confiscate it, but, on second thoughts, he left it where it was, and went away immediately. Probably the thieves would attempt to use it again that night, and it would serve as a bait.

He sent Sam back to camp to bring down some food, and tell the foreman that he would not be in that night. He had determined to lie in wait in the woods and solve the mystery.

It was a mystery which thickened, for as he was riding away Snowball trod in something curiously sticky and Joe glancing down, saw that it was turpentine gum. Dismounting, he found fully two gallons of the stuff loosely covered with rubbish. It might have been spilled by accident, but it looked as if it had been poured there intentionally.

Why anybody should have taken the risk of stealing the gum only to pour it out again Joe could not imagine. The negroes finished work and started up the road. Sam brought him a

packet of meat and corn-bread and a bottle of cold coffee, and left him. Joe ate his supper, tethered Snowball where there was grass, and, as the woods darkened, he ambushed himself behind a screen of young pines near the hidden wheelbarrow, laid the little rifle across his knees, and waited.

It was a hot night once more. Mosquitoes hummed viciously, and numbers of large bats circled overhead. A strange, hot smell rose from the river swamps close by, full of the odor of flowers, of bay-leaves, of rotting vegetation; it was so strong that his head swam. Fever was in that heavy air.

It was dark and dead silent, but soon the moon rose and flooded the woods with light. Whip-poorwills began to call; great moths and beetles flitted and hummed, and once he heard the screech of a wildcat far down by the river. It was windless and so hot and damp that the sweat stood on his face. It was a lucky thing, he thought, that his cousins had had no such weather on their recent camping trip. Unused to the climate, they would certainly have got a dose of malaria.

Joe found it hard to keep awake. He had

been in the saddle since early morning; and as he crouched there with his eye on the thicket where the mysterious wheelbarrow lay he found himself dozing.

He shook himself awake, but toward two o'clock he gave up. If any one was going to steal gum that night he would have been at it before this; and Joe buried his face in his arms and fell soundly asleep.

He awoke, feeling stiff and weary. The woods were growing gray with dawn. It was past four o'clock. Examining the thicket, he found the wheelbarrow undisturbed. His head and back ached, warning him that he would need a strong dose of quinine that day. He hankered after hot coffee, thought vaguely of riding to camp, but at last wandered slowly toward the entrance of the orchard to look for Sam with his breakfast.

Tired and listless, he sat down in a wide, open glade. There was a chill in the dawn air, and he felt cold, empty, and depressed. He pondered the series of misfortunes that had come upon the turpentine-camp, of which this gum-stealing was the latest. "Burnam 's surely in hard luck!" he

said to himself, digging aimlessly into the pine-needles at his feet. He found hard bits of rubbish among them; he picked them up, crumbled them, and threw them away indifferently, until he noticed that they were bits of rosin, and he wondered how they had come there.

Picking up a sharp stick, he drove it into the loose ground, and noticed that it struck something hard only a foot below the surface. He scraped away the mixture of earth and pine-needles, and found that a hard cake of rosin was buried there—how large he could not tell, but it seemed to be as solid as a boulder.

Joe was so accustomed to seeing lumps of rosin scattered everywhere about the camp that his finding the mass in that spot did not at first strike his preoccupied mind as anything remarkable. He continued to poke aimlessly into the ground, and only by degrees did he come to realize that this was an extremely large lump.

"I wonder how much of the stuff there is here!" he muttered.

With a stronger stick he probed into the ground about two feet away. There he encountered the same hard substance, a little deeper

down. Two more soundings at different points showed the same solid "bed-rock."

"Gracious! There 's yards and yards of it!" he exclaimed, amazed.

He had ridden over this very spot several times without ever suspecting the presence of that peculiar substratum. He dug down to hard bottom in another place to make sure that the stuff was really rosin. It was rosin indeed, blackish and much mixed with bark and dirt, but real rosin, and he could not guess how it had come to be buried there. Then, as he looked about the open glade, he remembered the old distillery that his grandfather and his great-grandfather had operated in those woods.

As a child Joe had heard it spoken of, but it had been demolished long before that, and he never had known the exact spot where it had stood. In those early days only the spirit of turpentine was considered of any value. The rosin was not worth the cost of shipping it out, and in nearly all the country stills it was run from the retort into a huge pit and allowed to harden there.

An old distillery would thus sometimes ac-

cumulate an enormous amount of waste rosin, and Joe remembered having heard of some of these old pits having been dug up with great profit. One rosin-reef in Clarke County had yielded, if he remembered rightly, nearly eight hundred barrels of good rosin, which sold for six dollars a barrel. And rosin was higher now.

All this rushed through Joe's mind in a sudden flood, and with increasing excitement he began to search the glade for further evidence. Under the gallberry-bushes he discovered a few crumbling bricks moldering in the soil; digging beneath them, he found traces of charred wood. More digging revealed an old, rusted iron bar, more charred wood, and a few pieces of tin, mixed up with scattered lumps of rosin. There could be no doubt that this was the site of the old turpentine distillery.

As the full force of his discovery grew upon him, Joe almost shouted with delight. Here was the way to recover what he stood likely to lose in Burnam's camp. He marveled that no one had remembered the old still before. It had been run for many years, and its accumulation of rosin might easily yield as much as the reef in Clarke

County. At the present prices of rosin, this great bed might be worth several thousand dollars.

With the old iron bar he began to probe the ground in every direction to ascertain exactly the size of the rosin pit. Wherever he struck the hard deposit he drove a little stake; thus he soon ascertained that the bed was more than twenty feet long and about half as wide. Its depth was the most important point, and he had no means of ascertaining this; but he drilled deep with his iron bar without going through it. As a pit had usually been dug in the earth to receive the rosin, he thought it might be ten feet deep. At a low estimate, the "mine" should contain four or five hundred barrels, worth perhaps two thousand dollars. At any rate, it would bring back a great part of what Burnam owed him, if he failed to recover it otherwise.

Then, all at once, the question came to him: Who was the real owner of this deposit? Burnam, it is true, owned the land; but the rosin had belonged to Joe's grandfather and to his father. Burnam had known nothing of the deposit when he bought the land. Morally, Joe felt that there

was no doubt about his right to reclaim the stuff which his family had inadvertently left behind. But the legal side of the matter was more dubious; the uncertainty fell like a wet blanket over his first enthusiasm. At last he rose, pulled out his stakes, hid the iron bar, and kicked pine-needles over the old bricks. He had not yet decided what he would do. Until he came to a decision he was going to keep the valuable secret to himself.

He hunted up Snowball and rode thoughtfully down the road, to look for Sam. The excitement of his discovery had made him for a time forget to be hungry, but he was beginning once more to feel extremely empty, and he was glad when the negro boy hove in sight with a package of food and a tin bucket of coffee, which he reheated quickly over a small fire. The rest of the gang came down a little later, uneasy at first about entering the woods, but, finding no more red strings or chickens' heads, they presently scattered about their work.

The rosin "mine" weighed heavily on Joe's mind all that day. The more he thought about it the more certain he felt of his moral right to

the waste from his grandfather's old still, but how the tangled problem would work out in law he could not say. He shrank from the idea of consulting a lawyer; secretly he was afraid that the decision might be against him. Of one thing he felt sure: He would rather let the secret die with him than allow Burnam to mine that rosin, especially if the camp collapsed into bankruptcy.

An instinct led him to keep away from the place of his discovery. The wheelbarrow remained untouched, and as he rode the woods that day he was continually on the lookout for any fresh clue to the gum-stealers. No gum had been taken that night. Whether this was due to his rather careless watch he could not say, but he felt that a guard should be kept the next night as well. He did not himself feel inclined for another night in the woods, and the negroes demurred instantly to the proposal. Even Sam shrank from it, but at last he did get three of them to consent to stand guard, in consideration of a dollar apiece and plenty of coffee.

He had grave doubts whether they would stay awake, but the next morning they swore that they

had not closed an eye and had heard no disturbance. An examination showed no gum had been taken, but the wheelbarrow had vanished. Some one had visited the woods that night.

However, Joe thought that the thieves had probably been frightened away, and the next night he left the woods alone, with some uneasiness. It turned out all right, however; no cups were found missing, and as the following night had the same result Joe's fear began to wear off.

The weather had remained hot, and the run of gum had been excellent. Within a few days there was enough for "dipping," or collecting the contents of the cups. Mule teams came down from the camp with the dip-buckets and barrels, which were set down at intervals through the woods, and in the afternoon the dipping gang came in, and began the heaviest, hardest work of the turpentine harvest.

The wooden dip-buckets weighed thirty pounds even when empty, but the dipper moved at a trot from tree to tree, deftly scooping out the thick, whitish gum from the cups with a wooden paddle. When the bucket was full he poured it into the

nearest barrel, and by night many of the barrels were nearly half full.

Joe was greatly delighted with this result, but when the dippers came in the next morning they found that some one had forestalled them. Fifty or sixty cups were missing from the trees, all of them ones that had been nearly full. A prolonged search failed to find any of them. Joe sent a hurry call to the camp for more cups. Mr. Burnam was not there, but the foreman managed to collect a few dozen, and Joe replaced as many of the missing ones as he could.

He had feared greatly for the safety of the partly-filled dip-barrels standing about the orchard, but an examination showed them all untouched. Perhaps they had been too heavy to handle; but Joe felt that they would have to be guarded in the future until they were hauled back to the still.

This mysterious lawlessness was intensely irritating and disturbing. It occurred to Joe that the thieves might possibly have come in a boat from the other side of the river, and he rode down to the shore to reconnoiter for tracks.

A heavy growth of willow, titi, and sycamore

made a dense belt along most of the waterside. Usually he could not see the river until he was within twenty feet of it, and he rode along, peering through the thickets, scrutinizing the ground for tracks, till he came to a deep, narrow bayou that ran inland for about fifty feet. A few willows grew along its banks, and through them Joe spied the black houseboat that he had seen floating down the river several days before.

CHAPTER VI

DISASTER

FOR a minute or two he sat on his horse and scanned the black boat. It was certainly the boat he had seen before, and he wondered how she had been brought back against the stream. She must have hired a tow from the steamboat, and he wondered what had been the inducement. As before, no one was in sight. No smoke rose from the stovepipe that projected through the roof, and the door upon the little end deck was closed.

"Hello! Aboard there!" he shouted at last.

There was a sound of stirring in the boat. The door of the cabin opened, and a man stepped out upon the stern deck, a ragged and disreputable object. He was dressed in a tattered cotton shirt and trousers, barefooted and bareheaded, with long, fair hair, straggling mustache and a yellowish, malarial complexion. He looked

startled; he gave Joe a glance of mingled fright and suspicion.

"Howdy!" Joe greeted him. "Camping here?"

"Fur a leetle while, mebbe," drawled the sallow man, looking him carefully up and down. "You 're Burnam's woods-rider, ain't you?"

"One of them. Can I come on board?"

The man hesitated, and spat into the bayou.

"I reckon you can't," he said at last. "My brother 's in yander, mighty sick, and he 's just gone to sleep."

"Too bad. What's the matter with him?"

"Chills 'n' fever. He 'll git over it. Just done had it myself. Gum runnin' good?" he added listlessly.

"Pretty fair. Some one 's been stealing some of it. Seen anybody round the woods at night?"

"Naw!" The river-man looked sidelong at Joe, and bit off a chew from a plug of tobacco. "Soon 's Bud gits well enough to help me, we aims to float down to Choctaw Bluffs."

"I saw you up here a week or so ago. How did you get back?" said Joe.

"Naw, you did n't. Ain't never been by yere before," returned the man quickly. "We been

up by Peach Tree, and we 're goin' to Choctaw."

"Going down to the River Island?" Joe asked casually.

"No, *sir!* Too many rough charackters there. They says Blue Bob uses the River Island this spring."

Joe had often heard of this same Blue Bob, notorious among the houseboat men, whose evil reputation had spread all along the river, from Montgomery to Mobile. Blue Bob, with a gang of disreputable associates, ran a large houseboat, combining a sort of small piracy with occasional selling of illicit whisky. He stole hogs and cattle along the river; he had been concerned in several shooting affrays, and had been several times arrested but had always been lucky enough to get off with nothing more than a fine.

It struck Joe that it might have been Blue Bob who had robbed the turpentine orchard, for the River Island was not more than thirty miles down the river. They had been almost within sight of it, in fact, on the recent bee-hunt. But he hardly thought that the lazy, shiftless figure before him, evidently a prey to hookworms and malaria, had had anything to do with the thefts.

The stealing in the turpentine woods had been energetic and laborious, involving a good deal of hard work. All the same, he felt that the black houseboat would bear watching, until "Bud" got over his chills and fevers.

He offered to get the boatman some quinine, which was declined, and he rode away with a careless good-by. For half a mile up the shore he proceeded, finding no traces of any other boat, until he was checked by an impenetrable swamp, and he turned back into the pine woods again.

The wagons had taken a load of gum-barrels up to the camp that day, where a charge was to be run in the still. But only a part had been taken; eight or ten partly full barrels still stood in the orchard, and Joe felt increasingly uneasy about them as the day went on. He determined to spend another night in the woods and guard them himself.

He rode up to camp for supper, however, when the negroes ceased work and found the still just cooling from its recent charge. The upper orchard as well as the river tract had been dipped within the last few days. Negroes were still barreling up the hot rosin, and he counted nearly

twenty barrels of turpentine on the plank platform beside the road, ready for hauling down to the steamboat. A great row of rosin barrels stood near the still, and Wilson told him that they were going to run another charge after supper.

After a hasty meal Joe rode back in the twilight to the river tract. Leaving Snowball tied near the road, he went quietly into the dim woods and stationed himself near enough to the houseboat to be sure of knowing if anybody left it or came to it.

There was a dull smolder of embers on the shore of the bayou, where the houseboat's occupants had probably cooked their supper; but there was no light aboard nor any sound whatever. Joe waited for more than an hour in silence; then, growing disgusted, he walked back into the pine woods a little way.

He had gone only a few paces when he thought he saw a flicker of light among the trees ahead. It seemed to increase rapidly. Wondering if it could be a camp-fire or a blaze from some chipper's cigarette, he started to investigate it. The glow brightened to a glare, and he covered the last half of the distance at a run.

As he broke out of the woods into an open space, a blast of heat struck him. One of the gum-barrels had been left there, and it was roaring and flaming like a gigantic torch, sending up volumes of pitchy smoke.

Joe knew well that he could no more extinguish that blaze than he could put out a volcano. Only quantities of sand would do it, and there was no sand. He knew, too, that the barrel had caught fire by no accident. There was an incendiary in the woods; and he cocked his rifle and stared in every direction. Nothing stirred, though all the woods at hand were lighted up like day.

Then in the distance he caught another ominous flash of flame. Sick at heart, he rushed toward it. Another of the barrels was on fire, too far gone to be checked. There were six or eight more barrels, standing at intervals of a few hundred yards, and with a sense of impending disaster he ran for the next in the line.

When he was still twenty yards away he saw the barrel flash up. In the sudden glare he thought he saw the retreating shape of a man. He shouted; then he fired two quick shots at the vanishing figure, but nothing answered either his

shot or his cry. Reaching the barrel he saw that a flaming splinter had been thrust deep into the gum. He jerked it out. The gum was not yet fairly burning, and he beat out the fire with a pine branch.

He realized that wholesale destruction was meant this time. He started toward the next barrel, and then stopped, perplexed and despairing. Help was what he needed. He wondered if they could see the glare of the burning barrels at the camp, and he looked in that direction.

To his dismay he saw that the sky above the far-away turpentine camp was red! Either the camp itself or the woods around it were on fire. Deeper-planned destruction than he had imagined must be under way, but he knew that it was at the camp that he would be needed most. Tearing through the woods to the spot where he had left his horse, he leaped into the saddle and went flying up the road.

The red glare on the sky seemed to increase. While he was still far off he saw a towering flame and heard the yelling of the negroes. He left the woods for a short cut, reached the clear-

ing, threw Snowball's bridle across a branch, and rushed into the fiery glow of the camp.

It seemed all aglare with fire and surging with men. The still itself was the centre of the conflagration. The wooden platform around the retort had already been burned away, and the flames were shooting high from the turpentine-soaked timbers; but that blaze was trifling compared to the roaring blast of fire that rose from the barrels of rosin. Three or four dozen of them were ablaze at once. The barrels had burst, and the molten rosin was running into a great lake of flame that spread and flowed like lava. A dozen negroes were throwing sand on it with shovels, but the flaming liquid splashed so dangerously that they had to give up the attempt.

Joe heard Burnam's voice roaring commands. A gang under his direction was pulling down several of the cabins nearest the burning still. Another gang was carrying supplies out of the commissary—high combustibles, tins of kerosene, boxes of cartridges, buckets of lard. The black, excited faces of the negroes rushing about in the red glare made the wildest scene that Joe had ever beheld.

He rushed forward ready to lend a hand at anything, but the pool of burning rosin caught his eye first. It was overflowing into the little creek that crossed the camp-space; the rosin floated flaming on the water, so that a burning current was beginning to stream down toward the roadway.

No one seemed to have noticed that orange rivulet of fire, but Joe remembered the barrels of turpentine spirit on the platform by the road. The little creek flowed right under that platform.

Joe caught an excited negro by the collar as he rushed past.

"Go tell Burnam to send some men down to the road right away to look after that spirits!" he cried, and darted himself in the direction of the threatened barrels.

The platform was eighty yards from the edge of the camp, and pines screened it from the glare of the fire. Three of the heavy posts that supported it stood in the stream, which formed a sort of pool among them. To Joe's relief, everything seemed blindly dark. The flood of fire had not yet come down, but he had scarcely reached the spot when a lump of blazing, unmelted rosin

came drifting down, and lodged right against one of the pine posts. He thrust it under water and extinguished it; but within a minute several more lumps came flaming down, followed by a stream of burning fluid that hissed and smoked on the surface of the running water.

Joe had picked up a shovel as he ran down, and now he cautiously flung sand on the water. Fire spattered fiercely in all directions. The dry brush along the road ignited, but he was able to beat it out. Running up to the top of the bank, he yelled at the top of his voice.

"Here! This way! Help!"

No one answered; no one came. His voice was totally lost in that shouting and uproar. No doubt the scared negro had forgotten to give Burnam his message. He started to run for help himself, when a backward glance showed him a tongue of flame licking up one of the posts of the platform.

He rushed back and smothered it. The liquid fire was coming down faster now, and threatened to spread over the whole pool under the platform. There was no time to seek for help. If he left the spot for a minute the spirit-barrels might

flash up like gunpowder. He wet down the posts thoroughly, but he realized that he would have to stop the stream of flame that was pouring into the pool.

With his shovel he set to work to throw a dam of sand and mud across the creek. Three times he had to stop and rush back to extinguish a fire on one of the posts. Drops of spattering fire fell on his hands; his clothes smoked, but at last he had the stream effectually blocked. Then he stopped, breathless, and beat the fire out of his coat and trousers.

While he worked, the thought had continually hammered at his brain that this certainly meant the end of Burnam's turpentine business, and of his own investment in it. The still was destroyed. A copper retort is extremely expensive. Even if money were forthcoming to buy another, it would take time to get it, and to set it up, and the best of the season's run of gum would be lost. It looked as if these barrels of turpentine would be about all the salvage from the wreck.

Then he noticed with consternation that the water was brimming to the top of his dam, and that burning rosin was beginning to flow over

it. He built it higher, but the water, carrying the liquid fire on its surface, rose steadily. Would that flaming stream never cease flowing?

For a moment he felt at his wit's end. Then it occurred to him that he should have provided for the water to drain out under the dam instead of over it. Thus it would carry no fire. He punched an outlet underneath, and had the satisfaction of seeing the level of the flaming creek slowly subside, and no more fire went over the dam.

His satisfaction was increased by noticing that the flow of liquid rosin was diminishing. The great lake of flame must have burned out. A good deal of the burning stuff had got past his dam, however, and a glance back at the turpentine gave him a shock of fright.

One of the barrels had caught fire. It was well smeared with raw gum on the outside, and was snapping and crackling fiercely, though the flame had not yet worked through to the contents. With a bound, Joe reached the platform. This barrel would have to be sacrificed to save the rest. The ground beyond the platform sloped away, and with a great heave he tilted the barrel up and

sent it rolling off. It landed with a crash, burst open, and flashed into a stream of flame; but the burning spirit, thinning and scattering as it went, flowed down the slope away from the platform.

And now no more burning rosin was coming down the creek. Isolated lumps still sputtered and flared, but the main flow had ceased.

With a last glance around, Joe hurried back to the scene of the main fire. The still had burned out, and the copper retort and brick furnace stood up barely from the ashes. The danger from the fire had shifted to a group of cabins. One had been burned and another torn down, and the men were working hard to save the others.

Shouting orders, pulling, hauling, wielding an ax, working harder than any of the men, Burnam was everywhere. He was hatless, his sleeves were rolled above his elbows, his face and arms were black with smoke, and his voice was hoarse with shouting. Joe almost ran against him, and the operator glared at him with bloodshot eyes.

"Where 've you been?" he shouted furiously into Joe's face. "Why have n't you been helping?"

Joe was so utterly taken aback that he forgot

the events of the last few minutes, and could only stammer that he had been "down in the river orchard."

"What were you doing there this time of night —and a night like this? Asleep, hey?"

"The gum barrels were afire," said Joe, more and more confused. "They 're all burned by now, I reckon. Some one must have—"

It was no time to give Burnam bad news. Joe thought for an instant that the man meant to kill him. He shrunk back as Burnam lifted his clenched fist.

"Burned? What were you doing, then? You dare to come in here and tell me that you let the gum burn up on your range? What d' you think I pay you for? You never were no good, anyway! You get outer this camp! You 're fired! Go get your wages, and keep away from here, or I 'll break every bone in your body!"

CHAPTER VII

STOLEN ROSIN

THE next minute Burnam had wheeled and was rushing toward his men, arms raised, shouting vehemently. Joe stood for a moment as if paralyzed; he made a step to follow Burnam; a flood of wild words rushed into his mouth; but then he stopped. This was no time for an altercation. But he would not lift another finger, he said to himself, to keep the whole camp from burning up; and, boiling with rage, he went straight to Wilson's house, where he boarded. He almost regretted his efforts to save the turpentine.

Nobody was in the house. Every one was out at the fire, which was mainly at the other side of the camp and at a safe distance. But the red light shone through all the windows, making a lamp unnecessary, and by the glare Joe went to his room and began to get out his possessions

and pack them in his trunk. His first idea was that he would leave the camp that very hour.

But this would be hardly practicable. He would leave the first thing in the morning. The more he thought of Burnam's incredible outburst the more outraged he felt at the man's injustice; and the more furious he felt with himself at the stupid answers he had made. But it was all over now; he was going to go. Burnam's camp was unquestionably going to go, too. Joe resolved to consult Uncle Louis, probably put his claim into the hands of a lawyer, and take what he could get as one of the creditors.

The only thing that cheered him was the thought of the rosin "mine." There was going to be money in that, and he felt no scruple now at taking possession. Burnam owed him more than that, if, indeed, Burnam had any rights in the rosin at all. Joe began to convince himself that the rosin mine was legally his own property. Surely it was absurd to think otherwise. He had, at any rate, no immediate way of deciding the question, and he was willing to take a chance on it.

How to get the stuff away was a troublesome

problem. There might be tons of it. It would have to be taken away by the river, on some sort of large flatboat or barge. He would need some one to help him at it, but hesitated to take any one into his confidence, for he knew that he would have to get the rosin out secretly, under cover of darkness, before Burnam could get wind of it. There was a sort of unpleasant flavor of stealing about the affair, but he tried to ignore that aspect of the case.

He thought of his cousins. Bob and Carl would probably be willing to help him. In fact, when he came to think of it, their rights in the rosin might be as good as his own. But he did not want to involve them in this possibly lawless affair. They had no feud with Burnam. At the same time, if he got the profits he hoped from the rosin, he was firmly resolved to put the money into the bee business of the young Canadians and become an apiarist himself.

He remembered Snowball, still hitched to a tree, and he slipped out to put the horse in the stable and unsaddle him. Snowball did not belong to Joe. It was Burnam's horse, but Joe had ridden him for almost two years and had grown

so fond of the horse that it was hard to think of parting from him.

The fire was under control now, and the red glow of the flame was dying down. Joe went back to his room and finished his packing. An hour later Morris, who shared the room with him, came in, black to the eyes, his clothes burned full of holes, and was surprised to find Joe lying on the bed, fully dressed and awake.

"Why, what 's the matter?" he exclaimed. "Where have you been? Not hurt, are you? Burnam was asking for you."

"He found me, all right," said Joe bitterly. "Is the camp burned out? Who set it on fire?"

"Why, nobody!" said the other woods-rider. "What made you think of such a thing? It was an accident—carelessness, rather. The nigger that tends the pump went off and left it while the still was working. The engine went wrong and stopped running water into the retort. It got hot, and the top of the still blew off. The red-hot rosin flew like rain, and the whole place was afire in two seconds. Where were you all the time?"

Joe briefly narrated the adventures of the evening, and his discharge.

"Shucks! that 's nothing!" said Morris. "The old man 's done that same sort of thing before. He was half crazy to-night; he did n't know what he was saying. You 'll find that he 'll be all right in the morning, and you can fix it up with him."

"What's the use," said Joe. "This camp will never run again. Burnam has n't got the money for a whole new stilling outfit and fresh cups, and then to stand idle for weeks while it 's put in shape. No, he 'll close down inside of a week, I 'll bet."

"Maybe you 're right," said Morris soberly. "I reckon I 'd better be studying about a new job for myself. What do you reckon you 'll do? There 's plenty of other camps, you know."

"Yes," Joe evaded, "but I think I 'll go down and stop with my uncle for a little while. I 've got money in this concern, you know, and I want to see what the chances are for getting any of it out."

For some time the two young men discussed the different turpentine-camps of the district, the

chances of employment, and the tendency of the turpentine market.

"Well, I 'm going to bed," Morris announced at last. "I 'm dog-tired. I 'll see you in the morning before you leave. But I think you 'd better see Burnam again before you do anything."

He turned in, and was asleep in a few seconds; but Joe felt that he would not be able to close an eye, and did not even undress. The glow of the fire had gone; looking out, he could see the beds of red embers, already fading. The camp had quieted. A brilliant moon shone through the window; the smell of burned rosin and pine came strong from outdoors, and a mocking-bird began to sing in the moonlight just behind the house.

The whole camp was dead asleep after its exciting evening, but there was no rest in Joe's heart. He was bitter at the thought of his lost inheritance, bitter at the way Burnam had rewarded his exertions. He had worked like a nigger, he told himself, only to be robbed at the end of it all. He hoped, indeed, to recover some of his loss from the rosin mine, but even this had a bitterness of its own. He had persuaded him-

self that he was acting rightly, but he could not suppress his dislike of anything underhand.

He was very tired, and at last he did sleep, not to awake until dawn. Morris still slept soundly; and without waking him Joe tiptoed downstairs. Nobody was yet up in the house, and, going to the kitchen he got a hasty cold breakfast for himself, and made up a large package of what food he could find—corn-bread, cooked ham, cold biscuits, and several raw eggs. He wanted provisions for one full day at least, and his board was paid for several days in advance. Later he could send word to have his trunk forwarded to him, and at some later day also he might draw his week's wages. He had a little money on him —all he needed for the present.

The black ruins of the fire looked more dismal in the dawn as he went out. He hurried to the stable and gave Snowball a half-dozen ears of corn, probably the last feed from his hands. His rifle was still in its sheath on the saddle, and he secured it, knowing that there was an unopened box of cartridges in his pocket. The horse neighed softly and nuzzled Joe's shoulder.

"Good-by, Snowball, old boy!" Joe whispered, and hurried out.

He ran almost upon Burnam, and started back, but too late to avoid the encounter. The turpentine operator was gazing despondently at the ruins of the still. His face was streaked with soot yet, as if he had imperfectly washed himself, and his face looked fatigued and worried and almost old. Joe expected another harsh outburst, but Burnam looked at him casually and nodded quite in his usual manner.

"Morning, Marshall!" he said. "You 're out early. Is there any hurry about dipping down in your orchard?"

"N-no. I don't think so," Joe stammered, quite overcome with astonishment.

"Well, you might ride over and look around, but I reckon I won't send the men over there to-day. We 'll need 'em here to clear up. Some one told me—maybe it was you—about some barrels of gum catching fire. Did it burn much?"

"Six or eight barrels, probably," Joe replied, recovering himself.

"That 's too bad. But I don't know whether

we 'll be turpentining the river orchard any more. I 've got to see about getting a new still first, and the furnace 'll have to be torn down and rebuilt, I guess. Come back and tell me how things look."

Joe muttered something inaudibly and turned away. He had no intention of ever coming back. But he was utterly amazed at Burnam's manner. Could it be that, as Morris said, the man had been so excited that he had not realized what he had been saying last night, and had now entirely forgotten it. Such stories had been told of Burnam before. It did not greatly matter, however; it was not so much words as facts that weighed upon Joe's mind. He felt sure that Burnam would get no new still. The camp would go under. Indeed, Burnam had almost admitted as much in saying that they would do no more with the river orchard—the best section of his whole tract.

As Joe walked slowly down the river road he reflected that it would greatly simplify matters for him if work on that river tract were given up. In fact, he would hardly have been able to dig into his rosin mine with the woods full of negroes.

As he went on the morning came up gloriously, windless and fresh. The damp clay-banks by the roadside glowed with crimson and vermilion: the scrub-oaks and pines beside it were dripping with dew. All the earth and its vegetation were drenched, and to avoid a wetting Joe sat down on a log by the roadside to wait till the dew in the woods had somewhat dried. Besides, he needed to collect his thoughts, to organize his plans.

He had sat there almost an hour, absorbed in schemes and speculations, when he observed a figure coming down the road. It was an extremely ragged negro, whistling loudly and carrying on his head a bundle wrapped in colored cloth. Joe recognized him with a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

"Sam!" he called. "What in the world are you doing here?"

The negro, grinning broadly and sheepishly, approached and put down his bundle.

"Dunno, Mr. Joe," he said. "I seen you come outer de camp 'fore day, an' I jes' follered arter you, to see what you was fixin' to do."

"I 've left Burnam's, Sam," said the former woods-rider.

"Now, I jes' figgered dat what you 'bout to do," said the negro boy, earnestly. "So 'm I, too. All de hands is fixin' to go. Dey says dere won't be no more wages paid at dis camp, now de still 's done burnt."

"I 'm afraid you 've got it about right," said Joe. "But you 'll be all right. You 're a good turpentine man now, and fellows like you can get a job anywhere. There 's a big camp across the river where I hear they want men. And here," he added, taking out two silver dollars, "I 'm a little short myself, but this 'll help you to get there."

"Thank you, Mr. Joe. Much obleeged!" said Sam, making no move to take the money. "But I 'd lots ruther go 'long with you, wherever you fixin' to go. Mebbe you 'll be woods-ridin' at some other camp, an' I kin git a job dere, too. But I don't want no money, nohow. No-suh, Mr. Joe! Ef you let me stay with you, I don't want no wages, an' mebbe I kin help you some."

"I 'm going to live a wild life in the woods, Sam," said Joe, gravely.

"Glory!" Sam shouted. "Dat 's de life for me! Now you jes' 'bliged to take me with you,

Mr. Joe! I kin snare rabbits, an' cotch birds in traps, an' I kin cotch fish where no one else can't cotch none. I knows how to make a canoe, an' I kin make a fire without no matches. I kin cook, too. Whoop-ee! You jes' wait till you tastes some of my cookin'. I tells you we 'll live high. Yes-suh, Mr. Joe!"

Joe laughed, a little touched too at the boy's loyalty. Then it came upon him that here was just the helper he needed for his work with the rosin. Sam was as strong as a young mule, and absolutely faithful. For a moment he hesitated about getting Sam mixed up in this surreptitious business, but he quieted his conscience by telling himself that he would carry all the responsibility, and if the venture succeeded he would give the boy good wages.

"Maybe I can use you, Sam," he said. "But it 'll be dangerous work, in the dark and on the quiet."

"Well, I ain't never stole no hawgs nor chickens," said Sam, evidently bracing himself for lawlessness, "but I—"

"No, I 'm not going to steal anything," Joe interrupted. "But we 'll have to live in the woods

for a while and work at night—work hard, too—and you 'll have to keep your mouth tight shut about it. If we pull it off I 'll give you big wages—three times what you 'd make turpentining."

"Golly, Mr. Joe! You ain't fixin' to make moonshine whisky?" cried Sam, alarmed at last.

"Nothing like it," said Joe, laughing. "Come along with me and I 'll show you what it is."

He led the way into the woods, past the emptied gum-cups, slowly refilling now, past the charred remains of the burned barrels, until he reached the open spot where he had discovered the rosin-bed. He glanced about with an instinct of caution, lest anybody should be within sight; then, with the iron bar he had used before, Joe raked away the pine-needles and uncovered the surface of the valuable deposit. As he worked he explained the origin of the mine to Sam, and unfolded his plans regarding it.

"Why, sure, I 've often heard of de old Marshall still," cried Sam, excited and highly elated. "But I never knowed where it was. Why, dere must be a reg'lar fortune in yander. I heered of a place like dis here, where dey got ten thousand dollars of rosin outer it."

"I reckon that 's a fish-story," said Joe. "If we do as well with this one I 'll give you a thousand dollars. But the trouble is to get it out and get away with it. This is Burnam's land, you know. He 'd order us off if he caught us at it, I 'm afraid. We 'll need tools to dig with, and we 'll have to have some sort of big boat, so that we can move it away as fast as we dig it out."

"Dat 's shorely so," said Sam, thoughtfully. "Goin' to be a mighty big job for jes' you an' me to git all out these thousand barrels of rosin. Yes-suh, Mr. Joe. But we kin do it. I knows a boy back at de camp what 's got a good spade he 'll sell for four bits. An' dere 's an old flatboat up de river bank a ways. I dunno whether it 's any 'count now."

Joe sent Sam back to the camp to buy the spade and another if he could find one, and also to get all the provisions he could. Meanwhile he himself went up through the woods to the river to look at the old flatboat, which he dimly remembered having seen some time ago. It was not more than half a mile away, and lay on the shore capsized, high and dry. It had been abandoned as useless, and was old, cracked, and leaky, but

it looked as if it might be calked up. Rosin was not a cargo to be harmed by wetting. But the boat would hardly carry the whole contents of the bed, and when it was once floated down the river he did not know how he would ever get it back again.

However, it was not worth while worrying about the second load till they got out the first, and he walked back, to wait impatiently till Sam returned with the spade. Sam had made all possible speed; he was out of breath with hurrying; but he had been able to obtain only one spade, and all the provisions he could secure were a large lump of corn-pone and about a dozen baked sweet-potatoes.

But with Joe's package of food this would do temporarily. He was feverishly anxious to ascertain the real dimensions of the rosin-bed, and he set Sam to open a trench across one end of the deposit, cutting clear to its bottom. Digging was easy in that sandy soil, and in a few minutes Sam had laid bare the end of the deposit and spaded the earth away, sinking a hole deep enough to ascertain the thickness of the rosin reef. It was fully four feet thick at that point,

and seemed to be ten or fifteen feet wide. The rosin was mixed with pine-needles, bark and sand, having never been strained; and it occurred to Joe, as a further difficulty, that he would have to remelt and strain it all, if he was to get the full market price. But he did not trouble himself about that, in the triumph of the moment. Sam was wildly enthusiastic, for his experience at the camp made him fully appreciate the value of the discovery.

"Done told you dere was ten thousand dollars' worth!" he exclaimed exultantly. "Whoop-ee! Reckon I 's goin' git my thousand dollars, Mr. Joe!"

"I reckon you won't," returned Joe, who was nevertheless almost as excited as the negro. "There 's nothing like that much. But come round to the other end, Sam, and let 's see how far it goes that way."

Sam spaded furiously through the deep pine-needles at the other end. At the depth of a foot or so he struck wood. It was a short piece of pine log. He threw it out, then came upon another log, but found no trace of rosin beyond a few loose lumps. Under the logs was a deep

layer of brushwood and pine boughs, still quite fresh.

"Dis hole 's been dug out already, an' filled up again!" exclaimed Sam, rolling horrified eyes upon his companion.

Joe seized the spade and tore out the rubbish. But Sam was right. A great pit had very recently been dug there. The diggers had then filled it in with brush, and, after placing small logs to make it firm, had replaced earth and raked the surface of pine-needles back as before. In probing with his iron on the first day Joe must have struck this solid wood in many places, imagining it to be the rosin-bed.

"Somebody's done robbed us!" moaned Sam. "Hol' on! Lemme try in another place."

He rapidly excavated another trench in a different direction. This was also a disappointment. Not a lump of rosin was there, nothing but the same cunning filler of logs and boughs.

"Try here. No, give me the spade!" exclaimed Joe, wild with anxiety.

At the end of half an hour the glade looked as if it had been blown up. They had dug it over from end to end, and the bitter truth was

plain to them. Somebody had already worked the mine. Only one end of the big deposit was left, which happened to be the spot where Joe dug into the ground on the day he made the discovery. All the rest of the rosin-pit had been emptied, and carefully refilled. From the size of the cavity it was apparent that hundreds of barrels had been taken out. Two dozen barrels at most would hold what was left.

"Oh, my lan'!" Sam mourned. "Ain't dat wickedness? Shore is! All de same, Mr. Joe," he added, brightening a little, "dere 's some left. Mebbe a hundred dollars worth."

A hundred and a thousand dollars were both fabulous sums to Sam, but Joe saw it differently. In despair he cast about to think who could possibly have perpetrated the theft so quietly. It had been done very recently. Several persons must have been at work to carry off that enormous quantity, and they must have had some means of transport handy, a boat or—

The memory of the black houseboat flashed into his mind.

"I know where it 's gone, Sam!" he cried. "What a fool I was not to think of it before. It

was n't gum they were after. It was this rosin. Pick up that iron bar and come along with me."

Joe snatched up his rifle, assured himself that the magazine was full, and started toward the river, with Sam at his heels. He suddenly felt an absolute certainty that the houseboat men had done the stealing; they had been responsible for all the late disturbances in the woods; they had been covering up their operations in this way. No doubt there were more than two men in that black boat, and the story of the sick brother was undoubtedly false.

In his wrath Joe scarcely stopped to reflect that he had only one weapon, against possibly three or four in the hands of lawless men. He had an idea of taking the enemy totally by surprise. They ran across the pine woods, went more cautiously through the swamp belt, and came at last in sight of the bayou where the houseboat had been moored. But the boat was gone. The bayou was empty.

Joe stopped with an exclamation of rage and despair. But Sam, after poking about the remains of the camp-fire left ashore, spoke with an air of determination.

"Dey ain't been gone long, Mr. Joe. Dese ashes was made last night, anyway. We kin cotch 'em yet. Dey 's shore gone down de ribber. Dey can't go up noways, an' dem houseboats travels powerful slow. Dere 's a canoe down at dis landin'. We kin run 'em down, ef you say so."

"Good!" Joe exclaimed. "We 'll do it. Run back into the woods and get the grub. I 'll go straight to the landing."

It was not steamboat day, and nobody was about the landing when he got there after fifteen minutes of tearing through tangled woods. He found the canoe, a home-made, ownerless craft that had been public property for years, and untied it. Ten minutes later Sam appeared with the packages of food, and they went skimming down the river.

There were several paddles in the boat and a strong current running, and they made good speed. The wooded shores rolled past. There was no chance of overtaking the houseboat for miles or hours, however, and as Joe paddled the manifold risks of the chase began to present themselves sharply. There would be trouble when he

did overtake the enemy; there might be shots fired. Sam was courageous and loyal, but he had no weapon but his iron bar. More force was needed for the pursuit, and Joe began to think of his cousins at the plantation. Before he reached Magnolia Landing his mind was made up.

"We 'll stop here at Magnolia, Sam," he said, steering in. "You wait for me. I won't be long."

Nobody was about Magnolia any more than at Marshall's, and Joe hurried up the road toward his uncle's place. Partly running, partly walking, he covered the distance in half an hour, and, entering the gate, he reconnoitered cautiously. He was not anxious to be seen. He did not want to have to make any explanations just then; but by great luck he espied Bob Harman lounging on the front veranda with a book. It was the very person he wished to see, and Joe managed to attract his attention and signaled to him to come down to the gate, where he waited behind a big chinaberry-tree.

Bob came out, astonished and expectant, full of greetings which his cousin cut short. In a

few seconds Joe informed him of the essential features of the situation.

"I 'm going after them," he said. "I 'm going to run them down and find out what they 've done with that stuff—get it back too. If you feel like it, get your rifle and come along."

"You bet I will!" exclaimed Bob enthusiastically. "And how about Carl?"

Joe hesitated. "This may be a serious affair," he said, "and I reckon one of you-all is enough to get into it. Don't say anything to anybody. Pick up all the grub you can lay your hands on. We may be out a couple of days, but I don't think so. If Aunt Katie asks about it, tell her I 've called you to go hunting in a hurry, and I 'll see her when we get back. Be quick, now."

Bob was quick. In fifteen minutes he was back, with a big newspaper parcel of provisions, his rifle under his arm, and his pockets heavy with cartridges. The two boys hurried down the road, caught a fortunate lift from a farmer's mule wagon, and arrived at the landing, where Sam grinned joyfully at this reinforcement. He

had met the Harmans when they visited the turpentine camp, and he was prepared to extend his allegiance to them also, as members of the Marshall family.

"Howdy, Mr. Bob!" he exclaimed. "We goin' cotch dem thieves now, shore 'nough."

"Not if we don't hurry!" said Joe nervously; and they all got aboard and paddled out into the current.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RIVER ISLAND

TALKING over his shoulder as he paddled, Joe explained the events of the past days more fully to his cousin, and described his discovery of the rosin mine.

"If we win out, of course we 'll share it," he added. "As a matter of fact, I expect you have an equal right in it with me. That was the old family distillery, you know."

"Not a bit of it," Bob returned. "You found the thing, and you certainly deserve all that comes out of it. I would n't take a cent. But, as a matter of fact, I doubt if either of us has any right in it. Burnam bought the place. He gets whatever is in the ground, whether it 's a coal mine or a rosin mine."

"I don't know about that!" returned Joe, with irritation. "Anyway, I'll hold that rosin as security for what he owes me."

"Dat 's right!" Sam approved. "An' we 're goin' cotch 'em. Dey 've got a long start, but we 'll cotch em, an' when we do cotch 'em, why, dey 've got all dat rosin dug up for us. Won't be nothing for us to do but tote it away."

"Pretty heavy toting," said Bob. "That boat must have carried several loads, to clean out the big hole you speak of."

"Yes, I expect she loaded up at night and floated down the river to some spot where they 've hidden the stuff, and then got a tow back with the steamboat. But Sam 's right. Those pirates really have done the heaviest part of the work. And we ought to be able to locate where they 've gone. That black houseboat 's too big a thing to hide."

Bob was used to paddling on Canadian rivers; Sam was a good canoeman, and with a strong current running they traveled fast. They went past the places they had lately visited on the hunt for Old Dick's bees. On each shore rose the dense, gloomy woods, broken at intervals by a bayou or creek mouth. Two or three times they paused to look into one of these openings where the houseboat might lie hidden, but there was

never any trace of it; and Joe did not really expect to find the river pirates hidden so near.

The river twisted like a serpent, and as they went round every bend they scanned the broad stream ahead for anything afloat. Nothing appeared, nor anything human on the shores, though they kept a close lookout in hopes of seeing somebody who might give them news of the houseboat. It grew near noon, and Joe was desperately hungry, having had nothing but a bite of cold food in the early dawn, back at the camp. Sam was hungry too, and they went ashore to rest and eat.

They went on again after a very brief delay, and for nearly another hour they paddled with the current. Then by good luck they espied a man fishing from a boat close to the shore, a swamp farmer who lived a mile back from the river. They paddled in and hailed him.

"You did n't see anything of a black houseboat going down the river lately?" asked Joe.

"Shore did. I seen that black boat goin' down 'bout day this mornin'—Blue Bob's houseboat." drawled the fisherman.

"Blue Bob!" exclaimed Joe, startled.

"Yes, sir. I reckon I orter know his boat—dog bite him! I 've seen him goin' down the river an' gettin' hauled back by the steamboat right smart of times this spring. I dunno what he 's up to. He stole three of my hawgs last month. Are you-all huntin' him? Has he stole anything of yourn?"

"He certainly has. Do you know if he had a light-haired, yellow-faced man along with him?"

"I reckon he did. There 's a man like that in the gang, an' some says he 's kin to Bob. Some says he 's wusser 'n Bob himself. There 's another man in the gang anyways; sometimes the gang 's more, sometimes less. They 're a right-down des'prit lot. You boys better not fool with 'em none."

"Where do you suppose they were making for?" Joe asked.

"I dunno. They lays up in all the bayous. Folks says Blue Bob mainly hangs out around the River Island, though."

Joe asked no more questions, but bade the man farewell, and turned the canoe slowly into the stream again. Blue Bob, the notorious river pirate! That put a different complexion on the

whole affair, and he no longer wondered at the theft of the rosin since that energetic and reckless gang had been at work. Glancing back at Sam, he saw that the negro boy looked considerably perturbed.

"What you goin' to do now, Mr. Joe?" Sam inquired uneasily, holding his paddle suspended.

"Why, go ahead," Joe responded, with somewhat more confidence than he felt.

"I don't want to fool with no Blue Bob," Sam protested. "He 's a shore 'nough bad man, an' he 's allus got a mighty tough gang with him. Dey 've all got guns, an' dey 'll shore use 'em. What 'll we do s'posin' we cotch 'em? Reckon we goin' be like de man what cotched a rattlesnake by de tail!"

"What do you say, Bob?" Joe demanded. "Are you afraid of your namesake? No use talking, he's a rough customer, just as they say."

"No, I 'm not afraid of any Bob," said Harman. "Anyway, we don't have to fight them, do we? What we want to do is to scout around, and find where they 've hidden their plunder. Then we might go and get a regular posse to help us. But

we surely are n't going to turn back now, are we?"

"Of course not," said Joe. "Sam, if you 're scared we 'll put you ashore, and you can walk home."

"No-suh, I reckon I 'm 'bleeged to go on now," said Sam with resignation. "Only I ain't got no gun, an' when white folks gits a-shootin' it 's allus de nigger what gits shot."

"There won't be any shooting, Sam. We won't let them see us at all. Paddle ahead now, boys, and we 'll all make our fortunes."

In spite of his outward determination, however, Joe was frightened himself. He knew better than his cousin what a dangerous exploit it would be to endeavor to track the river pirate down to his lair in that maze of swamp and bayou that was called the River Island. He sympathized with Sam. If he had been alone he might have given up the attempt, but he was ashamed to show fear before a negro, ashamed to propose retreat after his cousin's confident speech.

"But we never kin cotch up with 'em 'fore night," said Sam. "If dey started down 'fore

day, dey 'll shore make de River Island 'fore we does."

Joe perceived that this was probably true, and that if the houseboat once got into the labyrinth of the River Island it would be as hard to find as a rabbit in a blackberry-thicket. But they seemed to be in for it now, and there was no turning back.

The sun blazed down fiercely on the river, and sweat poured off the white faces and the black one as the boys drove the canoe down the current. But it was not till after two o'clock that, as they rounded a bend, the river seemed to split into two broad streams before them. Between the two channels lay a dense, unwholesome-looking swamp, a tangle of titi-shrubs and dead cypresses and vines and willows, all draped with gray curtains of Spanish moss.

"De River Island!" exclaimed Sam.

The River Island was only about twenty years old. Before that, it had been a peninsula formed by a great loop of the river; there were a few fields of corn and cotton in it, and perhaps a house or two. Then in one spring of exceptionally high water the river burst its banks, and

tore a new channel for itself right across the neck of the peninsula. As the new channel was the shortest, it remained there, and the old channel shrunk to a muddy, shallow river, wandering sluggishly through a maze of bayous and lagoons. Part of the peninsula was permanently overflowed; the rest of it was a wilderness of forty or fifty square miles. For the most part it was marshy and cut up with bayous, but there were ridges of high land near the middle. Some mulatto hunters dwelt near its edge, for there were bears, deer, wildcats, and wild hogs on the island; but much of the place was impenetrable except in winter, and probably no man had any thorough knowledge of its intricacies.

The paddlers stopped, and the canoe drifted slowly down toward the forks of the river. On the right lay the new channel, which the steamboats used; on the left was the old channel, a dull, sluggish, shallow waterway, but almost certainly the one which the houseboat would have taken, for it led into the heart of the island. Innumerable bayous and lagoons were there, offering good hiding-places, whereas the new channel flowed between comparatively unbroken shores.

"Now keep your eyes peeled, boys!" Joe cautioned, "and dip your paddles easy. Blue Bob 's bound to be somewhere in here, and we 've got to see him before he sees us."

Moving scarcely faster than the current, the canoe floated silently into the old channel. The stream was perhaps a hundred feet wide, and seldom more than four or five feet deep. The marks where the full river had once flowed here, in a channel of three times the present width, were still faintly to be seen, and the old river-bed laid bare was now a dense jungle of wet-loving shrubs, tied and twisted together with masses of creepers. The ground was a soft morass; every tall tree was draped with Spanish moss, and a heavy smell of decay of stagnation permeated the hot air.

"Those pirates must be immune to malaria if they live here!" Bob muttered.

Joe did not answer, gazing anxiously about him. He had an impression that they might encounter the houseboat at any turning, and his nerves and eyes were on the strain. He let Sam and Bob paddle, while he sat in the bow, holding his rifle cocked and ready, though he had no idea

of provoking hostilities if they could do their scouting unobserved. But no houseboat appeared; and the channel, as it wound and twisted sinuously through the swamp, gave no sign that anybody had ever passed that way before.

Presently a bayou twenty feet wide opened at one side, apparently leading toward the interior of the island.

"Let 's push in here. Looks like just the place they 'd hide in," said Joe in a low voice.

They pushed in. The bayou water was black and almost stagnant. Ricks of dead trees lay on the shores or half in the water. Queer pink cypress "knees" protruded through the mud. A long, brilliantly green snake wound swiftly through and through the branches, turning his head toward the stealthy canoe. A pair of wild ducks spattered up and rushed noisily through the air. The boys felt that they were hot on the trail, pausing behind every thicket of titi or palmetto and peering ahead; but within fifty yards further the way was completely blocked by a jam of fallen cypresses tangled together with bamboo-vine. Clearly the houseboat had never passed that way.

Disappointed, they had to turn back. A few rods further down the channel a second bayou opened into the swamp. This one led them by intricate windings for a great distance, until they arrived suddenly at a wide stream, and they realized that they had come back into the old river channel again.

The strain of keeping intensely on the alert, half expecting at any moment to be shot at from ambush, began to tell on all of them.

"Dis here 's shore 'nough one tangle!" remarked Sam, gloomily.

"It 's worse than our bee-hunting," said Bob, surveying the dismal labyrinth.

It was so hot that mosquitoes had suddenly become unseasonably plentiful, too. But they persevered, and after a few more side excursions that always ended in a tangle of fallen logs or a sudden shoaling into mud, they came at last to a wider channel that opened from the main stream. A brisk current was setting down it, and they steered the canoe into it, once more with expectation. For several hundred yards they traveled between a dense wall of swamp trees, cloudy with Spanish moss that almost met overhead.

Then the current slackened, and the stream widened into a broad pond.

It was a most dismal and depressing place. Dead cypresses and black-gum trees broke the surface of the lagoon, and the putty-colored water was full of snags and slimy branches. They paddled all around it, without finding any way out. There must have been an outlet somewhere, but there seemed no passage for the canoe.

"Can't we get out of here?" exclaimed Bob, desperately, mopping his wet brow. "This is an awful place. I know they never brought any houseboat through here."

"About the worst place I ever saw," Joe agreed.

"An' de sun's goin' down direc'ly, Mr. Joe," put in Sam. "Where we-all goin' camp to-night?"

The sun was, in fact, getting low behind the island trees. After sunset, the semi-tropical darkness falls quickly. The coming of night filled Joe with apprehension. There was no place in sight that was dry enough for a camp, and to stay in the boat would mean intolerably cramped quarters, myriads of mosquitoes, and

a chance of an attack of fever. At any cost they must get clear of this suffocating swamp.

"We might manage to get out on the main river again. There 's dry land there," Bob suggested.

"Dere's dry land somewheres in de middle ob dis River Island," said Sam. "Mebbe we could git to it."

"I wish we could. It 's too far to go around to the river. Besides, I don't know whether we could ever find our way back," said Joe. "Let 's look out for any spot dry enough to get ashore."

After circling the pond they turned back into the channel by which they had entered it, and paddled some way up. A narrow, deep creek seemed to lead toward the middle of the island, and they turned wearily into it. It did not look like a guide to a camping ground, and before long it ended in a pile of fallen logs, but the soil did appear firm ashore.

Joe pulled the canoe up to the fallen timber and was about to step out, when a thick, brown moccasin snake glided down the logs and dived without a splash into the water. When the boy

had recovered from the start this gave him, he selected a different landing-place and jumped. The log caved in under him in a slush of rotten wood. He went down over his ankles in muck, splashed out, scrambled on a firmer tree-trunk, and thence got ashore upon fairly solid ground.

"I 've scared all the moccasins away anyhow," he called back. "Be careful how you jump, though. There may be no bottom to that slough."

Bob transferred himself ashore very cautiously and without getting mired. Sam tossed the packages of provisions to the others, and then scrambled upon the logs himself, securing the canoe by its rope to a stout branch. The ground was unstable and shaking; brown water rose into every footprint. They made their way inland across tiny pools and rivulets, through stretches of marsh overgrown with shiny, broad-leafed plants, over a great patch of low palmetto, and then the ground began to rise perceptibly and to grow drier and firmer.

"Thank goodness, I believe we 're getting out of it!" said Bob.

The swamp vegetation was certainly disappear-

ing. It was a sort of hammock land now. Here and there a small pine appeared. The ground continued to rise, thinly grown with scrub-oak, and at last, after half an hour's tramping, they came out upon the top of a hog-back ridge that was almost bare of trees. Standing there they could look over nearly the whole low River Island.

Far to the south the main channel of the Alabama showed like a silver ribbon. Westward the river was nearer, but was invisible, its course being indicated only by the belt of dark swamp trees. Eastward the swamps seemed to run almost endlessly, but for an occasional ridge top like the one on which they stood. After the dark misery of those morasses the fresh air and the clear sunlight seemed delightful; but the sun was already sinking low over the woods.

They all brightened up wonderfully at getting out of that maze of mud and water. Sam threw off his hat with a loud exclamation of satisfaction.

"Dis here 's a fine place to camp!" he said enthusiastically. "Heaps of wood an' dry—"

He stopped suddenly, with his rovng black eyes

fixed on something down to the west, and his face grew keen and suspicious.

"Look, Mr. Joe!" he exclaimed. "Down yander, dere 's a house!"

The white boys gazed where Sam's finger pointed. But for the quick-eyed negro it might have escaped them, but now they saw it plainly enough—saw, at least, the gray patch among the green that was nothing but a shingled roof. It lay half a mile or so westward, apparently not far from the main river, and on somewhat lower ground than the ridge.

"We 've got to investigate that," said Joe, staring.

"Hol' on, Mr. Joe!" Sam ejaculated. "Don't you reckon mebbe dat 's Blue Bob's place?"

"Shucks! Those fellows have n't got a house. They live on the river," said Joe. "Besides, is n't their place just what we 're trying to find?"

"We must see what it is, anyway. Come along," said Bob.

They started down the slope of the ridge again, descended into a swampy valley, crossed a muddy, sluggish creek on a log, made a detour to avoid an absolutely impassable thicket of tall black-

berry-canes, and gradually came upon rising ground again. Scrub-oak reappeared; the ground rose, and then appeared to descend, and from the highest point they saw the mysterious building again, and more clearly. It was a small cabin, looking weather-beaten and gray, almost swamped in thickets, and there was no smoke from its chimney nor any sign of life.

"Just an old deserted negro cabin, I expect," said Joe, but they advanced cautiously all the same, the white boys in front with rifles ready, and Sam lagging a little in the rear with the load of supplies.

The cabin went out of sight again among the trees, but within a hundred yards they came upon a little spring. It had once been walled up with stones, and a tin cup, destroyed with rust, lay in the water. A tiny rivulet flowed away from it, down the slope ahead of them, and after another fifty yards' cautious advance Joe stopped, peering through the branches.

The cabin was just ahead, nearly surrounded by thickets of blackberry and wild growths of shrubbery. The briefest examination showed that it was untenanted. The doors and windows

were gone; vines hung in masses from the eaves, and tangles of weeds grew tall around the small veranda made by a continuation of the roof over the doorway.

"All safe! No river pirates here!" said Joe, laughing, and he threw his rifle over his shoulder and walked toward the shanty.

The others followed him. The ground was so encumbered with thickets of scrub-oak and tall weeds and blackberries that they had to wind in and out as if through a maze to get up to the cabin. A glance inside showed that no one had dwelt there for some time. Drifts of leaves and dirt littered the plank floor; there was not a particle of anything movable in it, and the rude stone fireplace was destitute of ashes.

A glance inside was enough. Joe stepped off the crumbling veranda.

"It 's a roof over our heads for to-night, anyway," he said. "Shall we camp in it, or rough it outside?"

Bob did not answer. He was looking curiously into the air, into the cloudless blue of the late afternoon sky. In the dead silence there was a curious low murmur, a faint drone.

"Sounds to me like—like something!" Bob muttered, still with his nose in the air. Looking up likewise, Joe perceived small dark specks coming down from the sky, coming over the tree-tops with the rapidity of light, and plunging down among the thickets around the cabin.

To the left of the old shanty the whole earth was a sea of blackberry-thickets, an acre or more of impenetrable, thorny jungle, growing almost shoulder-high. Bob advanced as close as possible, tried to part the canes, and peered in. He recoiled with an exclamation, brushing at his cheek, where a black bee was clinging and stinging furiously.

"I thought I knew that noise!" he cried. "It 's bees. See 'em coming through the air! That thicket 's chock full of bee-gums. I can see 'em."

"Shore 'nough!" exclaimed Sam. "I bet dis yere 's where dat old nigger Dick uster live, dat dey tells 'bout."

Bob looked at his cousin with comprehension dawning in his eyes. "That 's it!" he said. "Joe, we 've found Old Dick's bees after all!"

CHAPTER IX

BEES AND ROSIN

"I DO believe we have!" Joe exclaimed. "Yes, I hear the bees now. I did n't know what that humming could be."

"Yes-suh, dis shorely is dat Old Dick's cabin," Sam assured them. "I remembers now dey said he lived way down in dis yere River Island."

"Why on earth did n't you tell me sooner? I asked you about it long ago?" cried Joe.

"Did n't remember 'bout it dat time. But, Mr. Joe, we don't wanter fool with no bees now, not whilst we 're huntin' dat rosin."

"The bees might be worth as much as the rosin," said Bob. "What do you think they 'd be worth if we had them up North, Sam?"

"Dunno what they 'd be worth up Norf," said the negro, "but down yere where dey is, dey 're worth jes' mighty near nothin'."

"I guess that 's so," Bob admitted, "but if they

were in Canada I 'd expect to make a thousand dollars out of them next summer."

Sam laughed loudly, taking this to be a joke.

"The question is, how many gums are there?" said Joe.

It was impossible to tell. The blackberry-canes screened the ancient apiary, and only dimly could be seen the shapes of the gums, swamped by the undergrowth. Some of the gums were doubtless dead, but from the numbers of homing bees in the air Bob declared that there must be dozens of live ones, at any rate.

"We 'll have to clear away all this jungle before we can tell anything about it really," he continued. "We 'll have to have something to cut the blackberries away, and we 'd need veils and smoke, too. These wild bees are going to be cross, sure."

He looked about as if he thought of starting operations immediately, but at that very moment sounded, faint and far off through the trees, the report of a gunshot.

Sam stiffened up to attention like some alarmed wild animal, rolling his eyes in the direction of the sound. Both the white boys stood for a full

half-minute, intently listening, but no other shot came.

"That was our fellows!" Joe muttered.

"But it was far away," said his cousin. "All of a mile, I should think."

"Yes, and away over past the old channel," said Joe. "Down in the very district we were exploring. If we 'd kept on, we might have run right into them. Well, we can't do anything to-night; and they 're likely tied up for the night too. I expect that was Blue Bob shooting a wild duck for supper."

The shot had put the bees out of their heads, recalling the more immediate purpose. It was getting too late to investigate the bees, too; they were ceasing to fly, and a dull, steady roar resounded from the recesses of the blackberries, telling Bob's experienced ear that there were strong colonies in there that had had a good day.

The sun was shining red behind the trees now, and in an hour it would be dark. The question of a camp-ground was an urgent one, and they went in to look at the possibilities of the old cabin. Bob stopped just inside, sniffing.

"Smells like a beehive in here," he remarked.

There was indeed an unmistakable odor of honey and beeswax in the air, and with a cry of astonishment Sam pointed at a recess between the wall and the roof. There hung a great mass of brown honeycomb, covered with crawling bees.

They had an exit to the open air through a wide crack in the wall, and two or three of them took wing and buzzed threateningly about the intruders. Sam hastily retreated.

"A swarm must have hived itself here and built its combs right on the boards," said Bob, examining the mass cautiously. "By the dark color of the wax, they 've been here more than one season. When Old Dick moved out the bees moved in, it seems. I suppose they 'd stand the winter all right in this country, but they would n't last long in such a place up North."

"Well, we can 't sleep in this shanty, anyway," said Joe with decision. "I draw the line at camping in a beehive."

"They might bother us some, and very likely there are more nests like this in the place," Bob admitted. "We 'll find a place outside."

"We 'll go up by the spring," said Joe. "Sam,

hunt up some dry wood and get a fire going. We 'll unpack the grub."

There was a certain risk in lighting a fire, but Sam built it in a little hollow on the side of the slope, and screened it further with branches, so that the glow could not be seen far. Bob had brought a quantity of raw pork—the comestible that came nearest to his hand at his hurried departure—and Sam sliced it and set the slices up on little sticks to broil. He also made a short circuit of the camp and gathered a quantity of pepper-grass for salad; they had still some corn-bread and sweet-potatoes, and there was plenty of good spring water. It was not a bad meal, they all agreed; and being extremely tired, they all stretched themselves on the soft ground after eating.

Lying at a little distance, Sam crooned some wordless African melody half under his breath. Bob talked with his cousin for a few minutes, and then began to breathe heavily, but Joe lay sleepless for a long time. It was a hot, close night, and even on the high ground the mosquitoes hummed in multitudes. He shuddered to think what their numbers must be down in the bayous.

He wondered if the river pirates became eventually immune to their stings.

He got up and went quietly to the top of the ridge to see if there was any distant camp-fire visible. Not a spark was in sight, and a white mist lay low and thick over the swamps. Somewhere far away he heard the sudden, sharp shriek of a wildcat. Owls hooted hollowly; bats flitted silently about; the air was full of winged insects, whizzing, humming, buzzing. He felt less uneasiness about the proximity of the houseboat, for the darkness and the river fog would conceal one party as well as the other. He returned to the dying fire and lay down again, hugging his rifle. He wondered for some time if one of them should not stand guard, but while he was considering it he fell asleep.

He wakened again several times during that night; but at last he opened his eyes to find the east reddening, and the earth silvery with the dew. Mist lay over the swamps, and a belt of mist marked the course of the river. Bob and Sam were still asleep, but they awoke at his movements, and the negro rebuilt the fire. It was desirable to have the fire out before the mist

cleared to make smoke visible, and they hastened to broil the rest of the pork, and also roasted the eggs for an emergency luncheon.

"How about the bees?" said Bob when they had finished breakfast and put out the fire.

"Dis no time to fool with no bees!" Sam expostulated; but the boys walked down to look at the cabin again. It was too early for the bees to be flying much; only an occasional insect shot out from the thicket, heading toward the swamps where the titi was still blooming. Passing around the cabin, they pushed through the thickets of gallberry and scrub-oak, and presently found themselves close to a broad, deep bayou, flowing with a tolerably strong current between firm banks.

"I declare!" Joe exclaimed. "This must lead out to the river, and it can't be more than a few hundred yards, either. I wish we had time to find out."

"If we only had the canoe here!" Bob regretted. "Well, we 'll know how to find the place again."

"If we ever come back."

"Oh, I 'm coming back," declared Bob with de-

termination. "I 'm going to have those bees, in spite of all the river pirates."

The swamps were too dense to think of exploring the bayou to its mouth, and it would not have been worth while, for there was no doubt that it must flow into the main channel of the Alabama. After fixing the landmarks in their memory, they went back, picked up their supplies, and started for the canoe again, to continue the hunt, with a much more definite idea now in what direction to steer.

Going down from the ridges they found the night fog still lying thickly, and their back trail was not so easy to pick out through the dense, wet undergrowth. They lost it; they found it again in soft ground, but they had to retrace their steps many times, and it must have been a full hour before they found their last nights' footprints sunk deep in the sloughs of the lower ground, and came to the spot where they had left the canoe. Sam, who was leading as tracker, stopped with a cry of dismay.

"De canoe 's gone!"

"What?" Joe exclaimed. "Impossible! This can't be the right place."

"Yes-suh, dis de right place, shore 'nough. Here our tracks. See, yander 's de big log where de moccasin slided out. Dere 's de place where you sunk in."

"Yes, here 's where we left it," said Bob. "But look here, Joe! What are these tracks? None of us made these!"

"Dat 's shorely so. Somebody 's done come an' stole our boat!" Sam exclaimed.

There were indeed fresh tracks in the wet ground, tracks fresher than the ones they had made last night. They were deep marks of heavy boots, stamped deep into the mud, so confused that it was hard to say if more than one person had made them. But they had been made by none of the boys' party, and it was certain that some one had come through the swamp, cut the canoe loose, and paddled away in it.

"We 're in a pickle now!" Bob ejaculated. "What are we going to do?"

"I dunno," said Sam. "Course, with your guns an' my fish-hooks we kin live on dis island long 's we like—live good too, yes-suh. Or we might mebbe swim de old channel an' git 'cross to where somebody lives."

"Can't we trail that thief's back track and see where he came from?" Joe suggested.

"Good idea!" cried Bob. "He must have come from his camp, or from the houseboat, that 's certain. Very likely he 's paddled back there. Maybe we 'll find the rosin there, too."

"Mebbe find more 'n we kin swaller," said Sam; but they started at once to follow the trail back. The marks were plain enough, for the men—there certainly appeared more than one—had tramped recklessly through mud and water. The boys followed them through a swamp, across a creek, over a dry ridge, and then down again into a partly overflowed area, where the water stood among dead timber, tall grass, and piles of rotting logs.

As they came up a moccasin squirmed away into the mud. It looked a dangerous place in more ways than one. Joe almost flinched as he remembered his former experience with the bog, but they equipped themselves with stout sticks to feel the way or kill snakes, and waded in. The water proved scarcely knee-deep after all, and they were nearly across when Bob stepped unexpectedly into a deep hole of mud and water.

He might have gone down almost out of sight, if Sam had not clutched him by the collar and dragged him forward. Joe also seized his arm; it was hard to free his feet from the tenacious mud, but Bob at last got his arms around a cypress knee, and by pulling all at once they hauled him free.

They got across the bog without further mishap, but Bob was scared and shaken, and he had to sit down to recover himself. He was covered with mud; his rifle was mired also, and he had to take it to pieces, wipe the action dry, and fill the magazine afresh.

Then, when they were ready to go on, they found that they had lost the trail. Nowhere on that side of the bog could they find any tracks.

In hopes of striking the trail again they decided to fetch a circle all around the morass, but this device failed. Perhaps the tracks of the thieves had disappeared in the half-liquid mud. Perhaps the men had taken pains to pick their way on pieces of fallen timber. They struck a still wider circle without any more success, and they had to steer so crooked a course through the

swamp that when they thought themselves back at the starting-point they failed to find the flowed tract they had crossed.

"Lost—there 's no doubt about it!" exclaimed Bob, halting.

All the swamp looked queer and strange about them. They had not been at that place before. The trees were so dense that they could hardly see the sky, but the sun looked somewhat out of place.

"I dunno where we is," said Sam. "But I knows where de old channel is. I kin go straight there, yes-suh."

They debated for some minutes, and then started to find the old channel to make a fresh start. Sam started with a great deal of confidence, but within fifteen minutes they came to a slough of what seemed bottomless mud. Stiff-leaved palmetto grew on hard spots, mixed with small, dense titi shrubbery, and red-tipped cypress knees thrust themselves out of the morass, like strange fungi. Half-sunken fallen trees lay all over the surface, offering a possible way across; and for a hundred yards they scrambled through

this nauseous jungle, clinging to the shrubs and jumping from log to log. But the farther they went the worse the traveling seemed to get.

"We 'll have to give this up," said Joe at last. "Let 's try to get back to high ground and get our bearings again."

But it was as hard now to get back as to go forward, and they were so shut in by the swamp that they had very little idea in which direction the high ground lay. Almost at random, they made an angle to the right. They no longer knew whether they were going toward the river or away from it. The swamp had them trapped. Mosquitoes hung about them in clouds. They were wet and mud-covered and scratched with thorns, and the continual sudden dart and wriggle of a moccasin snake every few minutes kept them in a state of nervous tension. A moccasin's bite is not usually fatal, but it is very sickening, and it would have been no joke for one of them to have been bitten while they were snared in the labyrinth. They had almost reached the point of exhaustion and despair when they came to a really dry spot, like an island in the swamp, grown over

thickly with palmetto; and here they stopped to rest.

The sun still appeared somewhat out of place in the heavens, but from its height the day must be getting toward noon. Sam volunteered to climb the highest tree within reach and reconnoiter. He came down reporting that the ground seemed to rise not very far away to the left, and they started forward again. The maze of marsh and jungle continued. Twice they had to wade thigh-deep across bayous—or perhaps the same bayou—and they were all losing faith in the new course, when they came out upon the shore of a deep stream perhaps twenty feet wide, heavily overshadowed with trees.

"Surely this is n't the channel," said Bob.

"Too narrow, I think," said Joe doubtfully. There was a fairly strong current running, however, which indicated that the stream at any rate communicated with one of the great channels. There was comparatively solid ground along the shore, and they walked up the stream a little way, when Sam suddenly stopped and sniffed the air.

"Mr. Joe!" he whispered, "I smells rosin!"

They all stopped and sniffed also, but neither Bob nor Joe could detect anything. Sam was positive, however, and they cautiously proceeded a few yards farther. Here a heavy screen of rattan vine and honeysuckle drooped so heavily over the bayou that they could see no farther.

"Now you-all smell!" said Sam triumphantly.

This time Joe did detect the unmistakable odor of scorched rosin, the pervading odor at the turpentine-camp. It seemed to come from right ahead.

"If it 's rosin, it 's likely to be the rosin thieves too," Bob muttered.

But there was no sound, except the gurgle of the water flowing under the drooping creepers that dipped in the current. Directly before them the tangle of jungle on the shore was impassable. With extreme caution, they made a little detour, crawling through the green thicket. The smell of burnt rosin was sharp enough now; then Joe, who was leading, suddenly held back a warning hand, and dropped flat.

For a good half-minute they all lay motionless; then Bob crawled up beside Joe to look. He was at the edge of the thicket. Beyond them lay

the black houseboat, tied to a tree in the bayou, half-concealed by the streamers of vines and moss that swung from all the branches overhead. There was a little space of high and dry shore beside it, and two heavy planks ran as a gangway from the boat to the land. On the shore was a great iron kettle set up on stones, with dead ashes under it. Several barrels stood about; the ground was covered with lumps of rosin and rosin-soaked burlap cloths, and the smell was strong enough now.

"We 've landed 'em!" Bob whispered in the ear of his cousin, who nodded with a grin.

Nothing was to be seen of the pirates. The boys lay hidden for a long time, watching and listening, but nothing stirred about the place. The houseboat swung and strained at her mooring-rope; the current gurgled along her side. If her crew were aboard they must be all asleep.

"I 'm going to find out, anyway!" Joe whispered. "If they 're there we must jump on 'em quick, and hold 'em up before they know where they are. But I believe they 're all away."

He got up and stepped boldly out of the shrubbery, carrying his cocked rifle ready. Bob

came after him, and Sam, with a heavy club, followed them both. Joe walked straight to the gangplank and stepped aboard.

The cabin of the boat was cut in two by a sort of hallway, or "dog-trot," running right across it amidships, and the plank led up to this. Their first step on the gangplank showed something that had before been invisible—a barrel standing in this corridor, whose smears and stains of rosin indicated its contents.

From the "dog-trot" a half-opened door was on each side. Joe put his head into the stern cabin. No one was there. The small room was fitted with four bunks against the wall, filled with dry Spanish moss and some ragged blankets. There were a rough wooden chair, a plank table. A half-full box of shotgun shells, a broken bottle, and a cob pipe lay on the floor. Adjoining this room was a tiny apartment evidently used as a kitchen when weather did not permit of cooking at a fire ashore, for there were a small stove, scattered lumps of wood, a few cooking-utensils, a sack of meal, a suspended ham.

It was pretty certain now that no one was aboard the boat, and the boys looked into the

forward cabin with less uneasiness. But at the first glance Bob uttered a loud exclamation. There were four barrels in the room, which, though headed up, showed the hardened rosin oozing from the cracks between the staves.

"Told you-all we 'd shore find it!" exclaimed Sam, exultantly. "All dug out an' melted an' strained an' barreled up for us. We shore oughter be 'bleeged to Mr. Blue Bob!"

"Yes, but this is n't anything," said Joe. "Where 's the rest of it—the thousand barrels you said we 'd get?"

"I declare, I dunno!" Sam confessed. "Mr. Joe, you don't reckon dey 've done shipped it to Mobile an' sold it?"

"I 'm afraid that 's just what they 've done, Sam," replied Joe, regretfully. "But let 's look ashore a little."

They landed and examined the impromptu refinery. The impure rosin had evidently been melted up in the big kettle, and there were a big, rough trough, caked with the brown stuff, a wire-cloth strainer, and a quantity of burlap. All these things showed indications of much use.

The barrels on the shore were empty, with the exception of one that was about a third full of hard strained rosin. The kettle was quite cold; everything looked as if it was some time since operations had ceased.

"Afraid we 've come in just at the end of the job," said Joe sadly. "Likely it 's as Sam said, they 've been melting and barreling up all this rosin, and sending it down to Mobile as soon as they had a load. We 're too late."

Sam groaned loudly at this decision.

"Let 's have another look aboard," Bob suggested. "Is n't there a hold or something underneath the deck?"

They went over to the houseboat again very carefully without making any fresh discoveries beyond two rosin-caked shovels, doubtless used in clearing out the "mine." If there was a space underneath the deck they could not find any way of getting into it; and, in fact, Joe knew that these houseboats seldom have any storage space in the hull.

Giving up hope at last, they paused on the stern deck, where they had finished their search.

"Might as well give it up, I reckon," said Joe.

"But how we 'll get home without our canoe is more than I know."

"S'posin we turn dis boat loose," Sam proposed. "We could float right down to Dixie Landin', an' dese few barrels of rosin is shorely worth somethin'."

"No, we don't want to steal their boat, even if they did steal our canoe," returned Joe. "And these four barrels of rosin are n't worth the trouble of—"

He stopped short as a distant sound struck his ear. They had all heard it at once—a dip and splash of paddles from far up the bayou above them.

"Hear dat? Dat 's Blue Bob a-comin', Mr. Joe!" said Sam in a loud, scared whisper. "Cut dis boat loose, quick!"

"Get ashore!" exclaimed Bob. "They 'll catch us here."

"Back into the cabin, till we see who they are!" Joe ejaculated.

They stood still, amid these contradictory orders, undecided. The paddles sounded closer, around a bend of the channel. Joe dragged his cousin back inside the cabin door. He had a sud-

den impulse to rush ashore after all. Then Sam, almost gray with fright, rushed at the mooring-rope and began to saw at it with his knife.

"Hold on, Sam! Stop that!" Joe hissed at him, but the negro had severed the strands. The last of them parted with a jerk, and the released houseboat instantly swung out. The gangplanks splashed into the water. Without any control, the boat reeled across the bayou, half grounded, swung off again and smashed through the curtain of vines that had shielded her anchorage. There was a ripping and crushing of twigs and leaves, and then the branches closed in behind them. They were through and out of sight of pursuit.

CHAPTER X

DOWN THE RIVER

"DODGED 'em!" exclaimed Bob.

They could still hear the dipping paddles, and a faint mutter of voices. In another minute the new-comers would perceive that the big boat was gone. But for the present the boys were screened from sight, and a stretch of fairly open water lay ahead. Joe stepped cautiously out of the cabin and seized the great steering-oar, trying to hold the houseboat straight down the channel. But she was clumsy to handle. She banged against a tree-trunk, struck a snag with a terrific jar, and then drifted sidewise around a bend. Bob came to help at the helm, but their united efforts were incapable of holding the boat straight.

"You-all better git your guns ready," Sam advised. "Dem fellers goin' find out de boat 's gone, an' be after us mighty sharp."

Joe was extremely angry at Sam's rash act in cutting the boat loose. The heavy craft could never keep ahead of paddles, and at any moment the channel might end in a log-jam or a lagoon. And, to intensify his fears, there was a sudden shout of surprise and anger from behind. The thieves had discovered the loss of the houseboat.

"If you had n't been such a fool we would n't be in this scrape!" Joe exclaimed. "Now I think we 'd better turn this boat loose and take to the woods."

"Dey 're bound to cotch us anyways," returned Sam pessimistically.

It was not so easy to take to the woods. The shores were flooded on both sides. Water stood among the trees wherever they looked; there was no place to land. To plunge into that snake-haunted lagoon, into possible quicksands, was worse than to face the guns of the river-men.

In spite of their weight on the steering-oar, the heavy craft wallowed from one side of the channel to the other, moving with maddening slowness. Joe craned his head around to look forward; he thought he saw drier ground ahead,

and then the boat grounded heavily on a great sunken log.

"Help me shove her off!" he exclaimed. "Run forward, Sam. Get that other oar."

There was another big sweep at the bow, which the negro hastened to secure. The boat, pivoting round on the current, drove further on the obstruction, and heeled so far over that the deck sloped at a sharp angle. Joe and Bob shoved furiously. But the craft still stuck, and, as they hung there helplessly, there was another shout behind, and they saw a canoe just poking around the bend of the bayou.

By instinct they all dropped flat where they stood.

"Crawl back into the cabin," Joe whispered. "They must n't see us."

The two boys wormed back, flat on their faces. Looking through the cabin they espied Sam also crawling toward them, his eyes rolling with fright. He too had seen the coming canoe. Joe gestured at him, and he lay down just inside the door leading to the "dog-trot."

As yet they had evidently not been seen. Joe

took a cautious peep at the approaching canoe. It was their own canoe, as he had guessed, and he was relieved to see that there were only two men in her. They were coming on carelessly, talking as they paddled. It appeared that they thought the houseboat had broken adrift by accident.

"Lucky she stuck here," he heard one of them say. "I done told you-all that rope would n't hold, noways."

The canoe came up alongside, and both the boys saw it plainly. In the bow was the sallow-faced man with whom Joe had spoken up the river. At the stern was a tall, heavily-built man, with long black hair, and a cruel, brutal face. Across his brow, exposed by the pushed-back hat, was a great blue-black mark or stain, probably made by the powder-marks of a gun fired too close to his face. It was the relic of some deadly brawl, no doubt, and Joe guessed that this must be the redoubtable Blue Bob himself. Both men had guns laid back against the seats, and both carried sheath-knives.

Bob looked at his cousin questioningly, and touched his rifle. Joe hesitated, lying with the

powerful little rifle cuddled against his face and his finger on the trigger. He could easily have picked off both the men as they came up, but a boat-load of rosin did not seem worth two men's lives. But more than that was at stake. It was a question of saving their own lives. In a fight their only chance would lie in shooting first.

He put his head close to his cousin's ear and whispered:

"We 'll let them come aboard. The moment they 're on the deck we'll draw a bead on them and make them drop their guns."

The canoe ran alongside the houseboat, touching her at the end of the "dog-trot," which now slanted so steeply that the lower rail almost dipped under water. Blue Bob stood up carefully in the canoe, gun in hand, and prepared to step aboard.

Bob and Joe had their sights on him. The river-man had one foot on the deck and the other still in the canoe, when Sam leaped up with a yell of absolute desperation, and seized the barrel of rosin that stood in the passage. With a violent swing he half hurled it, half rolled it. It went like an avalanche down the steep slope. It

caught the pirate on the legs before he could dodge it. The flimsy rail crashed under the three-hundred pound weight. There was a yell, a curse, and canoe, barrel, and men collapsed into wreckage together.

"Whoop-ee! Dere dey go!" yelled Sam, wild with triumph.

Joe raised himself and caught a glimpse of the smashed canoe, of the men's heads struggling in a seething mass of muddy water. And at that moment the houseboat floated clear, whether by the jar of the fracas or by the lightening of the barrel cast overboard. She ground slowly off the log, swung about and began to drift again.

"Lie down!" said Joe under his breath, pulling Bob back as he was about to jump to his feet.

It occurred to him that the river-men had seen only Sam, and would attribute the whole affair to negroes. He had expected the pirates to clamber aboard out of the water but a cautious peep showed them crawling ashore, dripping, only one of them still with a gun. Climbing out in the mud of the bank they both shook their fists toward the retreating houseboat, shouting threats

and curses whose words were hardly distinguishable.

It was impossible to stop the boat or to give them any help, and neither of the boys had any sort of inclination to do so. These woods were familiar to the river-men; they would make their way to some accustomed spot, and there were almost certainly more of the gang somewhere about, who would give them assistance.

It was not till the clumsy craft sagged around another wooded bend that the boys ventured to stand on the deck. Sam approached them, all one broad grin of triumph.

"Reckon I put dem fellers out 'er bizness dat time! What you say, Mr. Joe?" he exclaimed.

"You surely did, Sam. You did nobly," Joe admitted. "It was just the thing. But now you 've got to steer us out of this bayou."

For the present nobody could do anything but steer right ahead. The stream widened a little; the shores became higher and drier. Joe thought by the direction that they must be approaching the main channel of the Alabama, when Bob seized his shoulder and pointed ashore.

The ground went up in a slope, overgrown with blackberries, small pines, and oaks, and through the thickets he caught a glimpse of the gray planking of a cabin surrounded by blackberry-thickets.

"Gracious! Old Dick's place!" he gasped.

"That 's what it surely is," said Bob. "If we 'd just waited here we might have seen the houseboat come right down past us before long."

"I declare!" said Joe, still in amazement. "I never dreamed that it was the same bayou. Well, we know where we are at last. We don't want to go ashore here, do we?"

"No, I guess not," returned Bob, looking longingly up at the home of the bees. "I guess we 'd better get out of this River Island as soon as we can. But where are we going in this boat, and what are we going to do with her?"

"Float her down into the river," said Joe. "Of course we don't want to steal their boat, and we 'll tie her up and leave her at the first landing we come to. They 'll be sure to come looking for her down the river, and they 'll find her all right. I 'm going to confiscate these four barrels of rosin, though. They 're worth thirty or forty dollars. We 'll either get the boat up to Magnolia

or get somebody to drive us over to the railroad. I suppose I 'll go back to the plantation with you. I 've got nowhere else to go now."

The consciousness of his unfortunate position came upon the woods-rider with extreme gloom. He had made up his mind that nothing was to be expected from Burnam, and he had counted on this rosin to recoup his loss. This had turned out an utter failure, and he no longer had his job.

"I suppose I might get another place as woods-rider somewhere," he said. "To tell you the truth, I 'd thought quite seriously of going into the bee business with you, if this rosin mine had only panned out."

"I wish you could, Joe," said his cousin earnestly. "We 'd like to have you, and you 'd find it 'd pay better than turpentining."

Sam, who had been listening, burst into a peal of laughter at this.

"Bees pays better 'n turpentinin'!" he shouted. "Hi-yi! Dat shorely is a joke!"

"You don't know anything about bees, Sam," said Bob severely. "Up North we owned close to ten million bees and two hundred queen bees. Every queen would lay ten thousand eggs a week,

and every egg would hatch into a new bee. We 've had pretty near a car-load of honey at once. One hive will make more honey than you could carry. I 've seen nearly one of those rosin-barrels full of honey taken off of one hive—worth fifteen cents a pound. These gums down here are n't big enough to hold a crop, and the bees swarm and go away. Our hives are made so that they can be enlarged as the bees fill them up. They grow higher and higher, till they 're higher than your head, all full of bees and honey and wax from top to bottom. There are men who made ten thousand dollars out of their honey in one summer. I 'll bet Burnam never made as much as that."

Sam's face had grown sober under this lesson in apiculture. He looked very doubtfully at the Canadian, uncertain whether it was a joke.

"Is all dat so, Mr. Joe?" he enquired dubiously.

"I reckon it is," Joe returned.

"Well, den," said Sam thoughtfully. "Don't you reckon we-all 'd better leave off turpentinin' an' go into de bee bizness? I knows where dere 's heaps of bee trees. Only," he added, "I 's

afraid dese here swamp bees ain't never learned to do no such stunts as you-all talk 'bout."

"Sam 's right," said Bob. "These swamp bees are a pretty scrub lot, I expect. Breed counts as much in bees as it does in horses. But all we have to do is to give these bees an Italian queen-mother. All the new bees hatching out then would be pure Italians, and in a few weeks the whole swarm would be through-bred."

"Well, it sounds mighty interesting," said Joe, "and I 'd like to go into it, if I could only raise some capital. I 'm sorry now I left Burnam in such a hurry. I think I 'll see him when we get back, and find out what he 's going to do."

"Hi!" shouted Sam suddenly. "Dere 's de river!"

So it was. The bayou had opened out, and just ahead they saw the wide flood of the Alabama.

"Thank goodness! We 're out of the swamps at last!" Bob exclaimed with great feeling.

But as the houseboat came into the current of the big stream, turning southward, her bottom grounded. She swung off a little, turned half about, and stuck solidly.

"Stuck on a sand-bar at the last minute!" Joe groaned in disgust.

Sounding with a stick, they found scarcely three feet of water over the side. The boat was hard and fast, and the current was pushing her more into the shoal at every moment. The boys stripped off the greater part of their clothing and got overboard. They heaved and hauled at the boat, tried to scrape away the sand, labored in the water for more than an hour, and finally gave it up temporarily and returned on board to rest. Then they attacked it again, but it was late in the afternoon when they finally got her afloat again, by the use of enormous levers brought from the woods.

Pushing out into the full current of the river, they let her drift, feeling at last tolerably sure that the adventure was almost over. They got out the provisions and ate them on the foreward deck-space. The sun went down; the dusk fell fast, but they saw no light ashore that would indicate any landing where they could put up the houseboat and find transportation for themselves.

Dark had completely fallen when they heard a tremendous roar, reverbrating and reëchoing over

the forest far ahead. It was the steamboat coming from Mobile, but she was still miles away. They heard her powerful whistle again and again, and at last beheld a shaft of white light playing on the trees, shooting into the sky, like a small, brilliant aurora. It was the boat's search-light, picking out the intricate land-marks of the channel, but the steamer was still far distant, and it was not for almost an hour that she really came in sight around a curve a mile below.

For half an hour they had seen her as a pale luminosity reflected on the sky through the trees, and she was an imposing spectacle as she swept around the curve, looking like a great white glow on the water, with the long dazzling shaft of the search-light shooting ahead. As she came closer they made out the red glare of her furnaces on the lower deck, the rows of lighted cabin windows, the glass pilot-house high over all where the steersman manipulated the searchlight. Her tall chimneys rolled out black smoke and sparks, and they heard the pounding of her engines and the "crash-crash" of her stern paddle-wheel.

"She is n't going to run us down, is she?" exclaimed Bob.

The houseboat was certainly a big enough object for the pilot to see. For an instant the search-light rested on them blindingly, then flickered away. The boat came on, blazing and roaring; she was going to pass several yards to the west, and would have paid no further attention to the houseboat, but Joe snatched up Bob's rifle, fired three shots in the air, and shouted.

The search-light turned on them again, dazzling, questioningly. The steamboat slowed, and somebody hailed them roughly.

"We want a tow!" Joe yelled.

He knew that these river boats would carry anything or tow anything that they were paid for. There was a little delay, and then the steamer sheered over toward them. They could see the black, interested faces of the roustabouts along the rail, and somebody threw a heavy rope. The houseboat jarred against the steamer's side, and the hawser was pulled tight. On account of the stern-wheel, towing had to be done alongside and not astern.

Joe stepped aboard the steamer, edged through piles of freight on the lower deck, and made his way to the forward stairway, intending to inter-

view the captain. There were very few passengers aboard, and at the top of the stairway almost the first face he saw was a most familiar one.

"Mr. Burnam!" he exclaimed.

"Why, Joe Marshall!" returned the turpentine operator, in equal surprise. "What on earth are you doing here? Taken to house-boating? And whatever have you been doing to yourself?" gazing at Joe's tattered and muddy clothing.

"This is n't my houseboat," said Joe. "I want to get towed to the next landing and leave it there.

He looked at his late employer with some doubt, remembering their most recent encounters, but Burnam's face expressed the greatest friendliness.

"Give this boat a tow to Dixie Landing, Captain Andrews," he said to the steamboat captain, who had come up behind them. "You can charge it up to me. I 'm mighty glad I ran across you, Joe," he continued. "I wanted to see you. Come with me into the clerk's office, where we can talk."

There was no one in the little den which the

boat clerk used for his business, and the two established themselves there and shut the door. The steamer got under way again, with the houseboat hitched alongside. By looking out the window, Joe could see Bob and Sam in the electric light, still aboard the captured craft.

"Morris told me all about your leaving," Burnam began, with a smile. "Reckon I don't blame you much. But I don't remember anything about jumping on you and firing you the night of the fire. I do things like that sometimes when I get excited, and I sure was excited that night. I 'd have fired anybody sooner than you. You 'll just have to forget it."

"Why, I—of course!" Joe stammered, taken aback by this frankness.

"Now I 've just been down to Mobile to see about getting a new retort for the still," the turpentine man went on. "I find that I can't get one inside of a month, and it 's cost about double what it 's worth at that. Nearly all my chippers have cleared out, too. The turpentine camp 's going to shut down.

"But don't you worry, Marshall!" he went on earnestly. "You have n't got stock in the busi-

ness, you know. You 've got my personal note for your money, and none of Bill Burnam's notes has ever been dishonored yet. I 've made a contract to sell the timber off the river orchard, and I 'm going to cut it next winter. That 'll clear all my liabilities and leave a handsome profit.

"Now I wish you 'd come back and help us close things up for a week. In fact, I 'll be using some men all the rest of the summer in the woods, and next winter you can help to manage the timber gangs, if you want to. Same wages, and I can pay off your note next spring; or maybe I could let you have a little sooner, if you needed any."

"Why, Mr. Burnam," said Joe, nervously. "I 'll come up for a week, sure; but the fact is, I 've been thinking of going into the bee business."

Burnam laughed.

"Along with your cousins from the North?" he inquired. "Well, that 's all right, Joe. Hope you make a big hit, and if it does n't pan out you can always come back and get a job with me, you know."

"Look here, Mr. Burnam, I 've got to tell you

something," burst out Joe, whose conscience had been troubling him. "I 've found—no, come along with me, and I 'll show you."

He hurried Burnam down the stairs again, and over the rail to the houseboat, where the turpentine operator recognized Bob and Sam with astonishment. In the cabin Joe pointed out the four barrels of rosin, and rapidly told the story of his discovery of the "mine," and its removal.

"You 're a wonderful woods-rider, Joe," Burnam commented with a laugh. "It seems you can get rosin even out of the swamps. But I knew all about that old still in the woods. I did n't know exactly where it was, but I 'd always planned to prospect for it, and dig up the rosin. It legally belongs to me, you know, the same as any other deposit in the ground, even if your grandfather did put it there."

"I was a little afraid it might be that way," Joe admitted.

"But you boys certainly deserve to have it," Burnam continued, "after the wild chase you 've gone through. You can have these four barrels, anyway. They 're worth thirty dollars, and I 'll

buy them of you now. I 'll write you a check in the office. And if you can locate the rest of the stuff, why,"—he hesitated a moment,—"we 'll go halves on it, and you can hold my half until my note is paid in full."

"Thanks," said Joe. "But I 'm afraid there 's not much chance of my ever locating it. I expect it 's all sold in Mobile long ago."

"Likely that 's so," Burnam admitted. We 're a few weeks too late, I reckon. Well, come along and I 'll give you the check for this, anyway, and there 's some wages due you, too, that you may as well have."

Joe was richer by sixty-five dollars when the steamer reached Dixie Landing, a few miles below the River Island. Here they left the houseboat, tying it carefully to a tree, to wait till the owners should reclaim it. That black houseboat, Joe found, was tolerably well known along the lower river, and no one would dispute Blue Bob's claim when he should come after it.

The four barrels of rosin were transferred to the steamer, to go with Burnam's next consignment. The boys remained on the steamboat also,

Bob to get off at Magnolia Landing, and Joe and Sam to return to the turpentine-camp for the closing up of the establishment.

"I 'm going back to get Old Dick's bees, you know," said Bob with determination.

"Of course," Joe returned. "Wait for me, though. I 'll be able to go with you in another ten days."

"All right, and meanwhile we 'll get everything ready," Bob agreed, as the light at Magnolia Landing came in sight.

CHAPTER XI

THE BAYOU BEES

BOB created a sensation when he returned to the plantation with his startling story. He had left only the vaguest word as to where he was going, and Uncle Louis was growing alarmed, and seriously thinking of a search expedition. Carl was indignant that he had not been allowed to share in the expedition; such a combination of pirate-fighting and treasure-hunting might never come his way again; but when the excitement had subsided a little it was the discovery of Old Dick's bees that came to be the subject of interest.

"I can't imagine why you did n't count them, Bob!" said Alice with impatience. "You don't seem to know anything about them; and after all the time we 've spent trying to find those bees—"

"You don't realize that the whole place was shoulder-deep with a blackberry jungle that would tear your clothes off," Bob returned with

equal impatience. "I could barely make out a few gums, but I know there must have been lots by the number of flying bees. Besides, we were hunting thieves. We were liable to be shot at any minute. I was n't in a frame of mind just then to crawl into a thicket and count bee-gums."

"Well, we 'll have to go right down there, and size the outfit up," Alice stated.

"Better wait till Joe can go," said Bob.

They discussed it again the next day. The season was drawing on fast. If anything was to be done with the bees that spring it would have to be done at once. The result was that Bob and Carl decided that, while waiting for Joe to finish at Burnam's, they should make a flying trip of investigation, to ascertain exactly how many bees were there and what could be done with them. Alice made a violent plea to go with them, on the ground that she could judge the bees better than anybody, but she got no support and had to give it up.

To save time, they took the steamer when she returned down the river again, three days later, and put Uncle Louis's boat aboard as freight. It was late at night when the boat arrived at Mag-

nolia, and some time before dawn when they were aroused to be put off at the River Island. They got into the rowboat, pulled up close to the land and waited there rather miserably in the darkness for more than an hour, uncertain just where they were.

Dawn revealed the low, swampy shores, looking monotonous and strange. Bob was still uncertain of his whereabouts, but they dropped slowly down the current and within half an hour arrived at the mouth of the bayou, which he recognized at once. Up the slow-flowing stream they rowed for a quarter of a mile, and then Bob pointed out the gray outlines of the cabin on the rising bank behind the thickets.

They drew the boat up and went ashore, Carl in a high state of expectation.

"No doubt about the bees, anyway!" he exclaimed.

It was a warm, damp morning and there was a deep roar of flying insects all about the old cabin. The bees were beginning their day's work. Black specks seemed to be streaming up from the budding berry-thickets, circling through the air, shooting out over the woods. A return-

ing bee, black as ink, its legs laden with whitish pollen, alighted gently on Bob's coat-sleeve, rested a half-minute, and then proceeded to its hive.

"Sounds like home!" Bob remarked, listening to the humming wings.

The bulk of the old bee-yard, such as it was, evidently lay in the dense blackberry-patch which occupied nearly a quarter of an acre. Probably Old Dick had kept his apiary here in a clearing, and the berry-canes had swamped it, as they always swamp deserted land in the South. The stubs of a few small dead peach-trees rose above the jungle, but scarcely anything else was visible.

The boys had come provided with strong pruning-clippers and a hatchet to cut a path into this tangle, and Carl reached gingerly into the thorny growth and began to cut. He had taken out a handful or two of the stalks when he leaped away with a yell, brushing frantically at his face. A host of bees had boiled up from a log on the ground at his feet, vicious and fighting-mad at the disturbance.

Carl sheered away and got rid of his assailants, but he took the precaution to put on a bee-

veil, and Bob followed his example, before they went any farther. The nest which Carl had disturbed was no "gum," but merely a hollow log which a swarm must have taken possession of. He gave it a wide berth, but a few moments later he came upon a real bee-gum, overturned on its side, but still tenanted by its inhabitants. About the same time Bob uncovered three hives, made of rough plank, standing close together.

The boys had no idea of clearing up the whole berry-patch. They wished merely to get a view of the interior, and, once inside the thicket, they found progress a little easier. From a slightly elevated spot they were able to get a partial view. At least twenty gums were in sight. Some of them were made of sections of hollow log placed on end and covered with a board; others were tall plank boxes, which seemed to have rested upon board platforms at one time. Through the thickets they could dimly distinguish others, some standing upright still, many of them fallen on the ground, or leaning against one another. Not all had bees in them. Carl cautiously raised the nearest, peeped in, and turned it upside down. It was empty and weather-

bleached inside and out. The bees had died and the wax-moth had destroyed every trace of the comb. But in spite of all losses it was plain that a great number of Old Dick's bees still survived.

"Can you make any guess of how many there are?" asked Bob, confusedly.

Nothing but the roughest guess was possible. They penetrated further into the berry-thicket, cutting away the canes, stumbling over logs, continually assailed by the irritated insects. But for the strong veils and oiled gloves they could hardly have held their ground, for the bees were unaccustomed to man and were nearly as wild and vicious as hornets. The further the boys went the more it became certain that the old negro's apiary must really have been extensive at one time. Perhaps there had been more than two hundred gums. A space of fifty yards square seemed to be covered with bee-boxes of all possible shapes and sizes, and now in every stage of decay. Some of them had fallen and become almost buried in weeds and rubbish, but the bees had stuck to their home, filling up the rotted holes

with great lumps and slabs of wax and bee-glue. Some of the plank gums seemed to be held together almost entirely by the plastered propolis of the bees' repair work; there were fly-holes at every point, and the Harmans regarded these edifices with admiration. They had never seen anything like it, and in the North bees could, of course, never survive a winter in such a hive. It was hard to make any sort of estimate as to the present contents of the apiary, but the boys thought that at least fifty of the old gums still had bees in them.

"At the rate of six pounds of bees to the gum," said Carl, "there must be three hundred pounds of live bees here which we can have for nothing. The dealers would charge us four hundred dollars or so for them. Then there must be a lot of honey in these old gums—several hundred pounds, probably, and certainly there 's a lot of beeswax. We can clear the whole place up, ship the bees North in wire cages in May, and the honey and wax ought to pay the expenses."

"So it should," Bob agreed. "And just think what all these bees would do on the clover in

Ontario next June! They ought to be worth a couple of thousand dollars, if it was a good season."

"We 'd have to camp here for a month or so. It would be quite like our first days in the backwoods apiary in Haliburton."

"I suppose we could fix up Old Dick's cabin so we could live in it. Let 's look it over. We barely glanced into it the other day," said Bob.

The framework of the old shanty was still fairly sound, being made of enduring cypress. But many of the boards hung loose from their rusted nails, and the pine floor of the little veranda was dangerous to step on. The roof, of home-made split shingles, was in a bad way. The door hung by one hinge, and the single window was little more than a shapeless hole. A honeysuckle vine clustered densely over the decaying pine posts of the veranda and was thrusting its tendrils through the window.

There was but one room. A great deal of one end of it was occupied by the big, roughly built stone fireplace. There was the broken wreck of a bench in a corner, but nothing else by way of furniture, excepting a sort of cupboard

fastened to the wall, closed with a buttoned door. Bob directed Carl's attention to the bees and honeycomb exposed on the ceiling. The insects were active that morning, crawling briskly over their combs, coming and going through a crack in the boards, and none of them offered to attack the boys, who watched them with interest. Indeed, bees will seldom sting when in a room or under cover.

"Pity we could n't leave this just as it is! It 's as good as an observatory hive," Carl remarked with his face a yard away from the mass of bees and honey. "But the first time we had a light in here the bees would all fly into it. We 'll have to cut all these combs off, and—"

"I believe this thing has bees in it too," interrupted Bob, who was trying to open the door of the old cupboard.

The door gave a little, and let out a trickle of brownish honey, and three or four excited bees. The insects buzzed about for a moment, and then found their way outdoors, and, examining the exterior of the cabin, the boys found a hole through the boards opposite the cupboard. There was a stream of entering and returning bees, and

it was evident that a flourishing colony dwelt there. Returning to the cabin, they presently discovered still another colony snugly established between the inner boards and the studding of the wall.

"Why, this place is full of 'em!" cried Carl, looking about rather wildly.

"The more the better!" Bob laughed. "I 'll bet anything there 's a swarm somewhere up the chimney too."

The chimney was built up on the outside of the cabin, and made of crossed sticks heavily plastered with clay. Carl put his head into the fireplace and gazed upward.

"You 're right," he said. "The chimney 's blocked half-way up, and I can hear the bees and smell 'em. We 'll never be able to get them out of that without killing them."

"Dick's gums must have swarmed and swarmed," said Bob. "Joe told me that the more swarms these gum-keepers get the better they like it. There must have been hundreds of swarms every summer, especially after the old nigger went away and the bees had no sort of at-

tention. I expect they filled up every hollow tree within reach. It 's a wonder they did n't overrun the whole country."

"Why, yes! There must be lots of bee-trees close by here," Carl exclaimed. "I never thought of it, but let 's look for them. They 're just as good as the gums."

They did not have far to look. Just behind the cabin they found a colony in a decayed stump, and another in a hollow gum-tree within twenty yards. Bob made the curious discovery of a swarm living in an old keg half covered with brushwood; the bees were flying through the open bung-hole. There were three more bee-trees a little way up the slope toward the spring, and down by the bayou they found apparently two swarms living in the same tree.

"The woods are certainly full of 'em!" said Bob. "Very likely there are more bees around here in the trees than Old Dick ever had in his gum-yard."

Carl stopped on the slope, surveyed the berry-thickets, the cabin, the jungly landscape for some minutes with an air of reflection.

"Bob," he said in a weighty manner at last, "do you think this is a good bee district? Lots of honey-bearing plants?"

"Yes, I should say so," replied his brother. "When we went through the swamps the other day we were n't thinking much about honey plants, but there 's titi and willow along all the streams. I know I 've seen hundreds of tupelo and black-gum trees. They yield honey in immense quantities, and will be blooming within the next six weeks. As for blackberry, you can see for yourself what a lot there is, and it makes the finest and whitest honey in the world. It 's just coming into bud. Why, what are you thinking about?"

"Just this," said Carl. "We can't do anything with these gums in their present shape. We could n't handle them: we could n't drive the bees out into our shipping-cages without wasting as much as we got. We 'll have to transfer all these bees into new, regular hives anyway. Why can't we transfer them, rear Italian queens for them all, and turn this whole wreck into a modern outfit? Then late in May we can take a pound or two of bees out of every hive and ship them home,

and still leave a working force with the hive here. We 'd get a crop of honey here, and then another one up North. And we 'd still have the bees here, so that we could go on doing the same thing year after year, shipping a hundred packages of bees to Canada every spring till we had all we could possibly handle. What do you think?"

Bob gazed at his younger brother somewhat staggered at this large scheme.

"How about the cost of putting all that through?" he said at last. "We 'd have to have hives, brood-frames by the thousand, an extractor, a regular equipment. And we 've spent more money down here already than we expected to."

"Well, we 've got cash enough to start with," Carl returned. "Then think of the honey and wax we 'll get when we transfer these gums! Enough to pay for the new hives. Then there 'll be a regular crop to extract before we ship any bees. The thing ought to cover expenses as we go along."

"Carl, you 're a genius," said Bob. "You 'll either make us rich or wreck us. Most likely you 'll wreck us. But let 's explore this place a little further before we decide."

They circled about the old cabin more widely, finding two or three more bee-trees; went over the ridge, and down to the lower ground where they examined the growths with great interest. Titi and willow grew profusely, as Bob said; but the bloom-time of these plants was over. There was a great gallberry marsh, however, a quarter of a mile from the cabin, due to flower in May; and all the lower ground was a tangle of the low, creeping, prickly dewberry-plants. These dewberries and blackberries were at present the most important of the honey-producing plants, for their honey was of the best quality, and they would be the next to blossom. Tupelo and gum-trees grew profusely all over the wet land, and, as Bob said, it looked as if there was ample pasturage for several hundred colonies.

They ate their lunch near the cabin, discussing the situation, and then started to explore the bayou upwards. Carl was anxious to see the place where the river-men had refined the rosin, and it was highly desirable to ascertain if these unpleasant customers had left the neighborhood. Luckily the pirates had seen nobody but Sam during the affair, so that both boys felt there

would be no serious danger even in a meeting; yet they rowed up the muddy stream with great caution, and peeped and listened before they ventured to push through the fringe of drooping green that cut off the houseboat's old moorage.

But there was nobody on the shore. The mound of ashes was there in the circle of stones, but the big kettle was gone. The scraps of burlap strainers seemed to have been burned; the empty barrels were gone. Nothing was left but the scattered lumps of rosin on the ground. The houseboat men had evidently been trying to clean up all traces of their operations.

It was a great relief to find that the pirates had definitely abandoned the place. Getting aboard again, the boys pushed a little way further up the bayou, which seemed to extend clear through the River Island and out to the old channel; but the tangled, half-flooded shores were so melancholy that they presently dropped down the current again to the bee-yard. Here they moored the boat, and started to explore the lower part of the bayou on foot.

The ground was higher here, and the walking dry and good, though obstructed with black-

berry, gallberry, and oak-scrub. They went down to the mouth of the bayou, then turned inland and came in a circle back toward the cabin.

The marshes and the strips of creek-swamp compelled them to take a most crooked course, and at last, tangled in the maze of morasses, they had to turn back to the river again for a fresh start. It was clear that they would have to keep to the ridges in future, and they were skirting along the shore, watching for a possible road inland when Bob suddenly stopped short, grasping Carl's arm.

Twenty yards in front a rough rowboat lay on the river bank. A man was stooping over it, either having just landed or preparing to embark. He carried a gun in his left hand, and he had neither seen nor heard the boys.

"One of the pirate bunch?" whispered Carl.

"No, I never saw him," Bob murmured, after getting a good look at the boatman. "Likely he's only hunting here. There's only one of him anyway. Let's go up and see what he says."

They walked boldly out of the undergrowth and approached the man, who turned about

sharply as he heard them, straightened up, and watched their approach in silence. He was middle-aged, bearded, and long-haired; he looked a typical backwoodsman. His clothing was faded to an indeterminate brown; he wore canvas leggings, and a canvas belt of shells about his waist, and he held his double-barrel across his arm.

"Howdy!" called Bob, trying to adopt the local greeting. "Hunting?"

The man looked them over with an appearance of intense surprise and curiosity. Probably Bob's Northern accent struck him as peculiar.

"Naw!" he drawled at last, without much amiability. "Ain't no deer nor turkey here."

"We heard it was a good place for game," said Carl. "Do you live around here?"

"Naw!" repeated the woodsman. "Don't nobody live here, I don't reckon. I lives 'way 'cross the river. Where do you-all come from?"

"Oh, from away up North," Bob told him.

"I shore thought you was some kind of Yankees. Now what you fixin' to do round here? You ain't huntin'?"

"Hunting a little—fishing—looking around," Carl explained. "We want to see the country.

We're from Canada, and we never saw anything like this before."

"I would n't think you 'd ever want to see it again," said the man. He took a corn-cob pipe from his pocket and lighted it, and looked at the boys with a little less suspicion. "This here 's the wustest place in the hull state of Alabamy. Ain't no deer here, no birds, nothin' but snakes an' mosquitoes an' chills-an'-fever, an' alligators."

"Lots of snakes and mosquitoes, I guess," Carl laughed, "but we have n't seen any alligators."

"Heaps of 'em, when it gits a little warmer. I shoots 'em in the summer for their hides. But them ain't the wust. There 's wildcats an' bears. But them ain't the wust neither. Back yander a mile or so the woods is full of the raginest, pizenest wild bees that anybody ever seed. Don't you-all go near 'em."

"Oh, we 've seen them," said Bob, smiling. "They won't bother us. We 're used to bees."

"Used to 'em, are ye?" cried the woodsman. "Well, you ain't used to no such bees as these here bees. Nobody durst n't go near 'em. They killed a nigger once. He tried to rob a little honey off 'em and they done killed him. Yes,

sir! Eat him alive, I reckon, for nobody never seen him again. The place is full of bones of hawgs an' polecats an' rabbits an' mebbe bears that them pizen bees jest nachrally killed. You-all better not fool with 'em!"

"Thanks!" said Bob. "We 'll certainly look out for them. What 's your name? If you 're around this way we 'll see you again, perhaps."

"My name's Candler," said the hunter doubtfully. "But you-all better not come by here no more. It ain't safe. Nothin' here but snakes an' pizen bees, an' they say there 's some mighty rough humans in these here swamps, too."

Candler was rough enough himself, they thought, but he did not look quite like a river pirate. They bade him good-by and left him busied with his boat, while they retraced their path for some distance, and finally found a passable road up to the high ground again and back to the old cabin. Here they sat down to rest, and watched the "pizen bees."

They were not vicious that afternoon. There was a good honey-flow, and they were far too busy to think of fighting. A heavy hum and roar pervaded the air. Bees were coming down in

streams, dropping heavily laden into the blackberry cover, streaming out again back to the honey sources in the swamps. Tired bees with great pollen-balls fell and rested on the ground; out of the cracks in the old cabin bees flew as if from a beehive. The sun shone bright; the air was hot and damp, and the boys sat for a long time in silence and watched their prospective apiary. As Bob said, it seemed like home.

"We 'll do it, Carl!" he exclaimed at last. "We 'll build this old ruin up into something valuable, and we'll make a permanent fixture of it. It 'll be worth a thousand dollars a year to us to have this yard to ship a fresh lot of bees and queens North every spring."

"Hurrah! Of course it will!" cried Carl. "Alice 'll be tickled to death when she hears of this scheme. And it 'll give Joe a chance to come in too, if he wants to. We 'd rather need somebody to keep an eye on these bees while we were up North."

Bob looked at his watch.

"Let 's get into the boat and start back!" he proposed. "If we 're going to put this big job through, there is n't an hour to lose!"

CHAPTER XII

TAMING THE WILD BEES

ALICE was, as Bob had predicted, "tickled to death" at the report and the plan that the boys brought back.

"Could n't possibly be anything better!" she exclaimed. "What a lucky thing we came South! With a permanent apiary down here, we can ship bees North every spring, enough to stock a hundred fresh hives, until we have—oh, the biggest bee-outfit in North America. Old Dick is going to make us all rich!"

"Maybe," returned Carl, "but he 's going to make us poor first. Have you considered how much it 's going to cost to outfit this swamp yard?"

"The wax and honey we get from the old gums will pay for it," said Alice optimistically.

That was what they all hoped, but they began to doubt when they made out a detailed list

of what the enterprise was going to need. They would have to take a complete outfit of bee-keeper's supplies, camp kit, and housekeeping outfit. The latter, indeed, could be borrowed from the plantation, but the apiary apparatus made a formidable list, and supplies were advancing in price. They had been through much this same experience in their first venture in the North; but there they had purchased a working outfit, while this apiary would have to be rebuilt from the ground up. Nothing but the bees themselves could be used.

Lumber to make the new hives, however, was an easy and cheap matter in that lumbering country. From a mill a few miles away Bob purchased dry cypress boards, cut and dressed to the proper width for the different parts of the hives, so that there was little to do but saw them into lengths and nail them together.

But the brood-frames, ten of them to each hive, carpenter's tools, smokers, a small honey-extractor, wire-gauze, comb foundation, and the innumerable small articles for bee work had to be ordered from Mobile; and they spent anxious hours over the dealers' catalogues, trying to se-

lect what they needed without spending more than they could afford. It was going to take more money than they had brought with them, that was certain, for they had never contemplated equipping a brand-new apiary in the South. They had to send to their Canadian bank for more money, and while they were waiting for it to arrive they borrowed two hundred dollars from Uncle Louis.

In the midst of this whirl of preparation Joe arrived unexpectedly.

"There really was n't much for me to do at the camp," he explained. "Burnam was just keeping me out of kindness, and I cut it short. I was getting anxious to see those bees again. Are you going back to look them over?"

"We 've done been, as you say down here," replied Bob. "We 've figured it all out. We 've got things started. Look here!" and he led his cousin to see the pile of bright new lumber for hive-making.

"Enough for a couple of hundred ten-frame Langstroth hives," said Alice. "We 'll ship it down on the steamboat and make them up on the spot. We 've ordered about four hundred dollars'

worth of supplies from Mobile too, and the boat 'll bring them up to the bayou. The freight alone is going to be an item."

"I can save you some of that," said Joe, suddenly remembering the old flatboat he had seen abandoned up the river.

"I 'll send word to Sam to patch it up a little and float it down here," he added to his explanation. "Sam's been asking me almost every day when we-all are a-goin' to go into the bee business. He 's got the bee-fever bad. I told him I could n't pay him any wages now, but he 's bound to come with me just the same. He 's mighty handy with tools and he can cook, and he 'll be mighty useful to us; and if things pan out well I 'll pay him something later. It 'll only be for a couple of months anyway."

Bob thereupon outlined the new plan of a permanent apiary that they had settled upon.

"But I 'm doubtful about taking Alice down there," he said. "It 's dangerous—a regular hang-out for river pirates."

"Well, she 'll be safer than any of us," said Joe. "The worst of these gangs in this country would n't molest a white girl. Besides, I don't

expect we 'll see any more of the houseboat men. They 're gone. They 've cleaned up their rosin deal, and they won't want to hang around that place any more. Even if they did turn up, they 'd have no occasion to pick a quarrel with us. They would n't recognize Bob or me; they never set eyes on us. We won't have anything they 'd want to steal, for they sure would n't touch those bees. No, I think it 's perfectly safe; and there 'll be four of us anyway, all with guns. But I 'm afraid it 'll be a rather rough proposition for a girl."

"Not any worse than we had up North," retorted Alice. "I can stand anything that Bob and Carl can, and I don't know how they 'd get along without me. They 'd be lost! No, I 'm going down with the rest of you when the steamboat goes."

That would not be for nearly a week, and in the meantime Joe managed to get a message through to Sam, who was still at Burnam's. The result was that a couple days later the negro arrived at Magnolia Landing in the old flatboat. He had patched it somewhat, but the old hull still leaked like a sieve, and Sam had navigated it

standing knee-deep in water. But the immersion and swelling was already closing the cracks, and another bout of calking would probably make it nearly water-tight.

Joe spent all day working over it with Sam, capsizing it on the shore, and melting rosin and tar. It still leaked a trifle when they had done their best, but wet would not damage most of the cargo, and they hauled the freight down to the landing. It made a full load, a regular "Robinson Crusoe outfit," as Carl said—the hive-lumber, odd-sized boards for repairs and making furniture, food supplies, cooking-utensils, the tent, bedding, tools, and weapons—and the new supplies from Mobile were still to come.

"I don't know about our not having anything worth stealing!" Bob commented as he looked at the load.

Joe and Sam started on their voyage a day before the steamboat was expected, in order to arrive first with the supplies. But the boat came unexpectedly early; she passed the flatboat halfway down the river, and Joe waved back to his cousins leaning over the rail of the high deck. Bob and Carl were waiting for him at the mouth

of the bayou, and they all poled and rowed the heavy craft up to the sloping shore where Old Dick's cabin stood.

Apparently nobody had been there since their own last visit. The bees were flying freely. Alice had already inspected them and was eager to begin work.

"But the first thing to do is to fix up a place to live in," she said. "And we can't do anything till we clear these bees out of the cabin."

Carl undertook the job. Well veiled and gloved, he carefully cut down the combs of the colony hanging on the ceiling, so carefully that he did not shake off the clustering bees. As he removed them he placed them in an old empty gum, finally carrying it outside and placing it near the old entrance through the wall, which he plugged up. By another day the bees would discover that their old home was outside instead of inside the cabin. By removing a board he was able to apply similar treatment to the swarm lodged inside the wall; and the one in the cupboard was easily handled. He simply pried the cupboard off the wall without opening it and carried it outside. But the colony in the chimney

could not be reached, and much against his will, he was forced to destroy it by lighting a fire on the hearth and smoking it out, afterwards poking down the combs with a stick. Most of the flying bees escaped, and the next day he found a disconsolate cluster of them hanging on the outside of the chimney. Climbing on the roof he brushed them into a sack and poured them into one of the living gums.

Meanwhile Bob had been nailing wire gauze over the window to make it bee and mosquito-proof, and he repaired the door. Alice set to work at the interior with the broom. Sam and Joe were carrying lumber and outfit up from the flatboat, and the hillside was a busy place. The boat was unloaded, but daylight ended before they had time to put things in order, and they knocked off work for that day. With Sam as assistant cook, Alice fried bacon and eggs and made corn-bread and coffee; they had brought butter and preserved peaches with them, and in the course of evicting the bees Carl had acquired several large chunks of honeycomb. It was dark and queer-flavored, and the expert apiarists did not think much of it, but Sam appreciated it hugely

Apparently nobody had been there since their own last visit

and ate most of it in the retired spot where he went away to devour his own supper. After the meal was over he brought water, washed up all the dishes, and restored order. Negro labor was a luxury to Alice, and Sam enjoyed the situation no less.

"Dis here 's de life for me, Mr. Joe!" he whispered confidentially, sticky with honey. "Dis here bee bizness is a mighty fine stunt, yes-suh, it shorely is!"

Alice made up a bed for herself on the floor of the cabin that night, and the other members of the party disposed themselves as comfortably as they could on the ground outside. By another night they expected to have things more suitably arranged, and when the next day came to an end great things had indeed been effected.

The cabin had been well cleaned out, with a cot, a set of shelves, and a rough table built for Alice's use. Adjoining the building Sam had put up a large shed, supported by poles, roofed ingeniously with a thatch of pine-boughs, broad palmetto-leaves, and Spanish moss which he guaranteed would turn water. Under this shelter they stowed the miscellaneous lumber and outfit, and

here, too, the boys arranged their own sleeping-place, counting that it would be cooler than the little cabin. Sam was berthed at one end and the white boys at the other, on rough cots of boards and poles, raised two feet from the ground to keep off the snakes and red-bugs. They were high enough above the bayou to prevent mosquitoes from being very troublesome, unless a wind blew the wrong way.

They set up the tent also, but it, like the cabin, was to be used chiefly as a shelter from rain. Even the kitchen was outside, an oven of large stones which Sam brought laboriously nearly two hundred yards, and Alice's few cooking-utensils hung on the outside of the cabin. On the shady side of the building Bob constructed a work-bench, and as soon as the housekeeping arrangements could be rushed through they began to saw up and nail together the new bee-hives, with their covers and bottom-boards. This was highly expert work, for the parts had to be interchangeable and uniform to an eighth of an inch; and Bob and Carl attended to it, while Joe and Sam undertook to clear up the ground and lay the old gum-yard bare to the sun.

In spite of his enthusiasm for the "bee bizness," Sam demurred at going into the blackberry-jungle where the old gums were hidden. He preferred to clear up the shrubbery and saplings about the cabin with an ax, and Joe therefore put on a veil and long-sleeved gloves, tied his trousers around his ankles, buttoned up his coat, and attacked the thicket with a heavy knife and a pair of pruning-clippers.

The bees, however, were working so well that they were not much disposed to molest him, except when he accidentally stumbled into one of the gums. This was frequently unavoidable, and after half an hour of work he had accumulated a considerable following of cross bees that hung in a cloud about his head, trying to get through the net veil. Secure in his armor, Joe was able to go ahead, but irritated bees began to pervade the whole place. Sam was stung twice, but he bore it heroically, only shifting his wood-cutting to a more remote spot.

As Joe cut away the thorny branches he raked them out and carried them away to a great pile back of the bee-yard. The old gums began to appear, showing how they had once stood in rows,

but now irregular, fallen, rickety, rotten. The home-coming bees hovered in clouds overhead, failing to recognize the place at first. Joe did not find any bones of beasts or men, as the hunter Candler had said; but about the middle of the old yard he did make a find of some value. It was a great iron kettle, partly buried in the earth, and half full of a hard substance resembling dried mud. He heaved it loose and carried it out to show the others. It was as much as he could do to lift it.

"Just what we needed to melt our wax in!" exclaimed Carl. "We 'll get Sam to clean it out, and if it does n't leak—"

Alice was digging into the hard brown contents with a knife.

"That 's what it 's been used for before," she said. "This stuff is beeswax. This must have been Old Dick's wax melter."

So it was, and the old kettle contained forty or fifty pounds of good beeswax, worth fifty cents a pound—probably the remains of the negro bee-keeper's last "run," and left behind by some oversight.

When he came near the farther end of the

thicket Joe made a less agreeable discovery. Dislodging an empty and overturned log hive, a snake glided out, a snake about four feet long, a sliding streak of yellow-brown with a checkerboard pattern of black down its spine. It ran only a few feet, then piled itself into a heap, turned its flat head, and the tip of its tail sent out a swift, buzzing whirr.

Joe stepped hastily back and retreated toward the cabin for a weapon. He did n't want to let that snake go; it was far too dangerous a neighbor to live. He did n't wish to have Alice see it either; but he beckoned the boys, and they had a look at the rattlesnake—the first they had seen—before Joe blew its head to pieces with the shotgun.

"Do you suppose there are many of these fellows about the place?" asked Bob, somewhat disconcerted.

"I 'm surprised to find this one," Joe replied. "It 's rather too swampy a region for rattlers; they prefer the high land. I don't think we 'll stir up any more."

He used more caution, however, in clearing up the gum-yard, but did not encounter any more of

the diamond-backs, though he started two or three small, harmless serpents, which he let go unmolested. By the end of the day he had all the berry-canes cut and piled in an enormous stack at a distance, and the ground cleared of rubbish. He had also picked out and removed all the dead and empty gums, and for the first time they were able to see exactly what they had.

There were seventy-eight gums containing bees, rather less than they had hoped for. But in addition to these, there must be almost as many more colonies living in hollow stumps and promiscuous places about the cabin, besides the bee-trees, of which there seemed to be an unlimited number. They did not care to establish more than a hundred and fifty new hives, and it was plain that the bees were not going to be lacking.

Nothing toward transferring the bees could be done until the new supplies came from Mobile, and it was two days more before the steamboat came up. She arrived about dawn, and stopped off the mouth of the bayou, awakening the apiarists by terrific blasts of her whistle. The boys dressed in haste and poled the flatboat down the

stream, laying it alongside the steamer while the roustabouts transshipped the heavy crates. All the boat's officers by this time knew about the bee enterprise of the young people from up North, and the boys received a good deal of good-natured jokes and chaffing when they went aboard to pay the freight. Then they pushed off; the steamboat resumed her course with a parting shriek; and the flatboat returned with its cargo up the bayou.

Alice had breakfast ready for them when they returned, and as soon as it was eaten they hauled the crates laboriously up to the shelter-shed. Without any delay they were ripped open, and the work began at once of nailing up frames.

There were two thousand frames, each made of four small pieces of wood, and they had to be put together with eight small nails. Afterwards the frame must be strung with wire to support the honeycomb, and lastly filled with a sheet of comb foundation—a thin sheet of pure beeswax stamped in a pattern like the base of a natural bee-comb. Upon this the bees build their cells, saving wax, saving time, and producing a more

uniform and perfect comb than if the insects were left to build according to their pleasure.

There was work for everybody now. Everything that resembled a hammer was put into play, and there was an incessant rattle and tapping as frame after frame was nailed up, wired, filled with foundation, and put into the new hives. Five pairs of hands made rapid work, and as soon as a dozen hives were completely prepared Bob and Alice carried them into the apiary and started to drive the bees.

Neither of them had ever done such a thing before. Gum hives are unknown where they learned their bee-keeping; but they had carefully studied the method of procedure given in the books and hoped for luck.

Alice had unpacked and lighted one of the new smokers, and she approached the gum they had selected and blew smoke vigorously through its entrance hole. In terror the bees rushed inside, and, after waiting a few moments, Bob picked the gum up, set it a yard aside, and placed the new hive exactly where it had stood.

With a hatchet he knocked the board top off the gum and placed a wooden box over it, made

to fit closely. Then he and Alice began to blow smoke into the bottom of the gum and to pound on it with sticks and the hatchet.

The bees within were fairly subdued with fright, and began to leave the combs and crawl upwards to escape the smoke and the drumming. In about five minutes a peep showed that the small box was almost filled with a clustered, frightened mass of bees, too demoralized to fly, and capable of being poured like water. Bob quickly dumped this cluster on the entrance of the new hive, and, after some hesitation, the insects began to crawl into the unfamiliar home, glad of a refuge anywhere.

Alice meanwhile reached down into the gum with a long knife and cut out a large slab of comb containing brood and honey. This she tied into an empty frame and placed it in the hive, so that the bees should find at least some relic of their former home. While she was doing this Bob pointed quickly.

"There 's the queen!"

A slender-bodied insect, twice the length of an ordinary bee, had emerged from the mass and was crawling slowly and with dignity into the

hive entrance. A stream of workers was already following her, and in a moment or two all the crowd of bees on the entrance board began to put down their heads and vibrate their wings rapidly, in token of joy at seeing signs of re-adjustment after the catastrophe that had befallen them. The returning bees in the air also, who had hesitated in wild consternation at seeing their old home gone and this strange edifice in its place, now began to alight and venture in to deposit their honey or pollen.

"They 'll be all right now," said Bob with satisfaction. "They 'll start building on that foundation, and if the honey-flow keeps up they 'll be a good colony in four weeks.

What bees were left in the old gum they knocked out without much ceremony, and Bob split the gum in two with the hatchet. Alice selected two or three good smooth sheets of comb containing sealed-over brood, presently to hatch into young bees, and tied them into frames which she added to the ones in the hive. Then Bob carried away the wrecked gum and handed it over to Carl, who cut out the rest of the combs, saving out such as contained honey enough to be worth

extracting, and throwing the rest aside for melting into wax.

Elated with their initial success, Bob and Alice attacked a second gum. But this one did not go so smoothly. The bees were reluctant to leave their combs and go into the upper box. It took fifteen minutes of pounding and smoking to get a cluster of any size, and then they refused to stay in the new hive. They ran in and ran out again, took wing, and numbers of them detected their old gum and made desperate efforts to get into it again. Bob had to split the gum to pieces before they could get nearly all the bees out of it, and there, almost by accident, they espied the queen, in a corner of the black, crooked combs, surrounded by a knot of her bees who would not leave her. Alice picked her up and placed her in the new hive, whereupon the commotion quieted down.

The third gum proved very weak in bees and hardly likely to build up into a colony of any value. Then came several good ones, and the pile of cut-out wax and honeycomb grew rapidly.

The carpenters meanwhile were preparing the new hives faster than the apiarists could use

them. A great stack of the prepared boxes was ready, and the whole party turned in to help at the transferring.

Carl and Joe worked at one gum while Bob and Alice treated another, and Sam, muffled in a heavy gauze veil, stood ready to fetch and carry. This made progress rapid. By the latter part of the afternoon forty of the old gums had been transferred to the modern hives, and the whole place was so overrun with irritated and confused bees that they decided to stop work for the day.

The intention had been to put all these full honeycombs through the extractor; in fact, they had counted rather heavily upon the thousand pounds or so of honey that they were going to get from the gums. But by degrees it began to be clear that this was an illusion. The gums had less honey than they had expected, and it had to be cut out in broken bits and irregular lumps that the extractor could not handle. The honey was dark and dirty besides, full of crushed brood and sand and pollen.

"Not worth bothering with," said Carl in disgust. "What 'll we do with it? Unless we get

it out of the combs it 'll make a mess when we try to melt up the wax."

"Can't we-all eat it?" Sam suggested. He had been surreptitiously slipping lumps of comb under his veil all the afternoon.

"Don't worry, Sam. You 'll get all you can eat," said Alice. "We 'll spread the rest of the combs over the ground and let the bees rob it out. They 'll carry it back to the new hives, and we 'll get it just the same."

As long as the light lasted they worked at preparing new hives and frames for the next day. Even after that, Bob undertook to continue nailing frames by the light of fat-pine torches, but the flare drew such intolerable numbers of all kinds of nocturnal gnats, flies, and moths, to say nothing of bees, that he had to give it up.

Honey seemed to be coming in freely the next morning. The new hives had recovered from their confusion and were settling down to work, making the best of what must have seemed to them a terrible catastrophe. The honey flow was so good, in fact, that the bees refused to touch the exposed pile of combs. When honey

is to be had in the flowers, bees will refuse to take it in any other way; and Alice's plan of having the old combs "robbed out" had to be postponed till the harvest was less good.

That day they transferred all the rest of Old Dick's gums, and Alice looked with immense pride at the trim, modern apiary that had replaced the wreck. Another day cleaned up about thirty of the colonies scattered about in stumps and hollow logs. The honey flow continued strong. The dewberry was in bloom now, and the slopes were all white with the little flowering vines. From morning to night there was a steady roar from the bee-yard, and, looking into some of the first transferred hives, Alice found that the bees had built out all their foundation into comb. Already the queen had deposited eggs in some of it, while the bees were putting honey in the rest—thin, colorless nectar just gathered from the dewberry-blossoms.

"At this rate they 're going to need top stories in a week," said Alice. "We 'll have to get a lot of supers ready. Maybe we 'll have to send for more supplies."

"Knock on wood," Carl advised. "Everything 's gone too smooth so far."

Alice refused to knock. The sun went down cloudy that night, and a breeze rose, blowing up from the swamps, and bringing hordes of mosquitoes upon it. That was a distressing night. Alice was protected by the screened window and door of her cabin, but the boys found it impossible to sleep. Sam finally built a choking smudge of damp wood, and they all sat beside it, half suffocated, dozing at intervals; until toward morning rain came down in torrents. It drove off or dissolved the mosquitoes, and in time soaked through Sam's supposedly waterproof shelter. They were forced to take refuge in the tent until the rain ceased shortly after dawn.

It had brought a change in the weather. The wind had turned to the north; it was cool, and the secretion of honey had ceased. The bees were cross and restless. Shortly after sunrise they discovered the pile of cut-out honeycomb, and a riot of robbing ensued. The heap of wax was entirely obscured by the clouds of insects all trying to get at the honey. The apiary was full

of flying bees, aware that honey was coming from somewhere, but not yet knowing its source, darting toward the woods and returning, and trying to rob one another's hives. Excited with the plundering, they grew cross. The apiarists had to put on veils to cross the yard; and in the midst of the uproar Bob, happening to glance down the slope, saw a boat run up to the shore, and a man get out of it. He started up the bank, carrying a gun over his shoulder. Bob touched Carl's arm and pointed.

"Candler, I declare!" Carl exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIII

PIRATES' TREASURE

THEY all stared. It was, sure enough, the hunter whom the boys had encountered in their exploration of the island.

"He 's coming to see us!" Bob exclaimed. "He 'll get stung to death if he walks up here like that."

"Stop him!" cried Alice, and they all ran down the slope toward the visitor, gesticulating and calling to him to go back.

Candler had already heard the tremendous roar of wings and had stopped uncertainly. At that moment a bee dashed into his face, and he jumped back brushing frantically.

"Don't come any further, Mr. Candler!" Carl shouted. "Wait—we 'll give you a veil."

Candler had got rid of his bee. He backed away a little, looking savagely at the veiled faces. He seemed to regard Alice with amazement, then

he scowled at Bob and Carl, recognizing their features at last through the black net.

"I done told you-all not to come round here no more!" he growled.

His temper was evidently much ruffled, but Carl laughed.

"Did n't get stung, did you?" he said. "I know you warned us, but bees don't hurt us. That 's our trade."

The hunter snorted contemptuously. He gazed up at the rows of new hives that had replaced Dick's old apiary.

"Them bees won't stay in them patent gums of yourn," he said. "Them 's wild bees. And them bees don't belong to you-all noways. You ain't got no right to 'em."

"Yes, we arranged all that with the people who own the land," said Bob.

"They don't own 'em neither. Me and my partners bought 'em from Old Dick's family. We 're fixin' to melt 'em up for the beeswax. You-all did n't ought to done nothing till you found out who them bees belong to. Now you 'll have to git."

The young apiarists looked at one another for

a moment in silent amazement. Evidently Candler was affected by something more than the irritation of being stung. He had come to give them notice.

"Well, we 're certainly not going to get out," said Joe firmly. "I 'm Louis Marshall's nephew, up at Magnolia Landing, and these are my cousins. I know well enough Old Dick did n't have any family. We 've got our title all fixed clear to these bees, and we 're going to keep them."

"We 'll see about that when my partners get back," returned the hunter. "That 'll be the end of this week. I 'm givin' you a friendly hint now. My partners ain't easy men to fool with, an' if you ain't gone by that time you 'll wish you 'd never seen this here River Island."

He gave them another threatening glance all round and then turned and strode down to his boat. Getting aboard, he rowed up the bayou toward the interior of the island and vanished around a bend.

"What did he mean?" gasped Alice, with a choke. "We 're not going to lose our bees?"

"Of course not. That fellow has n't the ghost

of a claim," said Joe. "We got the outfit fairly, and nobody can run off with it."

"I don't believe we 'll ever see Candler again," said Carl. "He saw that we had something valuable, and he tried to bluff us out of it."

"But he spoke of partners. You don't suppose he 's one of the river gang after all, do you, Joe?" asked Bob.

Joe thought decidedly not. Bees were about the last thing the river pirates would ever try to steal.

"I think it was only a bluff, as Carl says," he reassured. "Don't let him scare you, Alice. We 'll see the thing through."

They walked back to the cabin, encouraging each other, yet without recovering confidence. Candler's attack had been startlingly unexpected. They had imagined themselves free from any sort of human intrusion, for by this time they had almost ceased to think of the river pirates. Now the whole swampy wilderness took on an air of danger. They hung about the cabin, listening to the roar and riot of the bees, nervously on the alert, in spite of the confident and cheerful things they kept saying.

The uproar of the bees died down with evening. The combs of honey had been licked out perfectly dry. As it grew dark Bob and Joe climbed to the highest point of the ridge and looked over the swamps in every direction in search for the glow of a camp-fire; but not a spark of light showed anywhere.

The wind had gone down and there were few mosquitoes, but the boys spent a watchful and uneasy night. The next morning came up clear and warm. The honey flow from the blossoms had recommenced, and the bees were at work. Only a few inveterate robbers still hung about the pile of combs, looking for a last drop. The apiarists still were uneasy and tired after a more or less sleepless night.

"Let 's get to work!" said Carl, after they had lounged about uncertainly for some time after breakfast. "Nothing 's going to happen. I 'm going to melt up this wax."

It broke the spell; they all hastened to take a hand in the operation; and, once more engaged in doing something, their uneasiness disappeared.

Carl lighted a fire between four large stones, on which he placed Old Dick's wax-kettle. As

soon as the iron was warmed through, the contents came out in one great cake of solid wax, at least fifty pounds of it, a valuable haul. He set the kettle back on the fire and put in about ten gallons of water, filling it up from the pile of broken combs that the bees had cleaned out.

By degrees this melted and frothed up in a yellowish, seething mixture of wax and boiling water, along with the innumerable cocoons of generations of bees that had hatched in those combs. Sam held a burlap sack over an empty barrel, and Carl dipped out this thin, hot paste into the sack. When it was half full he knotted up the mouth, and the two of them squeezed and pressed the soft contents between two boards till nothing more could be squeezed out. Then Sam emptied the sack of its steaming black mass of refuse and cocoons, now almost drained of its wax.

"We lose a good deal this way," said Carl to Joe. "We ought to have a regular screw press that would get every particle of wax out of this slumgum; but it would n't have been worth while to get one for this single melting."

Bob meanwhile had been filling up the kettle

a fresh lot of combs, and as soon as they were melted up Carl and Sam squeezed them out. It took all the forenoon to finish melting and pressing that enormous pile of broken combs, and when they were done the barrel was half full of a black, oily-looking fluid, steaming hot still, but beginning to show flakes of yellow as it cooled.

"Why, there must be hundreds of pounds!" Joe exclaimed, trying to tilt the barrel.

"Wait till it cools. A good deal of that is just water," laughed Alice. "You always get disappointed when you come to weigh the wax."

This active employment had quieted their nervous anxiety, and they ate dinner with a much easier mind. Candler had said that his partners would not come back till the end of the week. More probably they would not appear at all, and if they did there was no sort of likelihood that they would go beyond demands and threats.

Carl kept anxiously testing his beeswax, but the cake was not entirely cool until the next morning, and then they had to break it to get it out of the barrel, which was smaller at the top than in the middle. The wax came out in three great lumps, with a great quantity of black, syrupy

water. They had no weighing apparatus, but Carl happened to know that his shotgun weighed exactly seven pounds. On this basis he constructed a rude pair of balances, arriving at the result that there were a hundred and sixty pounds of wax—approximately. With Old Dick's cake they had more than a hundred dollars' worth.

The weather had turned hot and moist—ideal weather for honey secretion—and the bees were working furiously. Apparently the shock of the transferring had stimulated them to double energy. Looking into the hives, the boys found nearly all the new frames were built full of comb already and being rapidly filled with honey or brood. The "pizen bees" were growing more accustomed to being handled also, and were less irritable than at first; but they were black and inferior stock at the best, and Alice was impatient to begin to introduce Italian blood.

The steamboat passed the next day, and Joe signaled it. He took out the beeswax, packed it in a box for shipment North, and himself embarked for Magnolia Landing. Late the next afternoon he came back in Uncle Louis's rowboat, bringing a sack of meal, a ham, and a quan-

tity of sugar and coffee; and while at the plantation he had mailed an order to a queen-breeder near Mobile to send a dozen Italian queens in care of the boat clerk. He also instructed the clerk to try to get a dozen empty glucose barrels from one of the Selma candy-factories, for it was plain that they were going to have honey to extract presently.

Candler had made no sign during his absence, and the bees had been working heavily. The blackberry was coming into blossom now, and the gallberry would follow. There would be an unbroken flow of honey from one source or another for two months, and they began at once to prepare supers, or top stories, for all the strongest colonies, to give them more room for storage.

By way of keeping Sam busy, they set him to finding and chopping down bee-trees—a task which suited him exactly. He cut six trees that day, and Bob was able to transfer the bees and part of the comb in four of them. The others were too badly smashed by the fall to be of any value; and on the whole they hardly considered bee-tree cutting a success.

"We 've got enough," Alice pronounced. "If

we get any more bees, we 'll have to order more frames and foundation, and we can't afford that."

The next day was the end of the week, and they looked out with some anxiety for the return of Candler and his mysterious partners; but no one appeared that day or the next. Late in the evening the boat came down from Selma, bringing the empty barrels, which the boys paid for and landed, ranging them in a row back of the cabin. It looked like a formidable measure for the bees to fill, Joe thought.

"Not a bit of it," said Alice. "I expect we could get a couple of barrels right now, even before the supers are on. Only it is n't ripened yet. We 'll have to extract before you know it, and we must have things ready in time. I wish some of you would go over the cabin and make it really bee-tight. We 'll have to do the extracting there and the floor is full of cracks."

Bob undertook this task, finding plenty of small holes in the wall that had been overlooked before. The floor was, as Alice said, in poor condition. Many of the boards were cracked

and rotted, and he undertook to drive them tightly together and nail them down.

"Why, these boards are n't even nailed!" he remarked; and a moment later he uttered a loud cry of astonishment. "Seems to be a cellar under this house!"

"A cellar!" exclaimed his sister, who was looking on. "I always thought the floor sounded hollow there. Maybe there 's an ancient treasure in it."

"Old Dick's gold!" said Bob, raising two of the loose boards. There really was a deep, dark hole underneath.

"There is—there is something there!" Alice cried excitedly.

Indeed the hole was by no means empty. Bob could dimly see something like a pasteboard box, and he lifted it out and opened it. It contained two dozen pearl-handled pocket-knives, each wrapped in tissue paper as it had come from the factory. Reaching down again, Bob brought up an unopened box of cigars.

Joe and Carl, who had been nailing frames just outside, were attracted by Alice's scream,

and rushed in. They all gazed at the find incredulously. Sam too came up behind and stared over their shoulders, his eyes widening at the sight of the buried treasure.

"How on earth did these things get here?" Carl ejaculated.

"Just guess!" returned Bob, with a glance at Joe.

He dived again into the dark hole. Two more boxes of cigars followed the first, then a large case of rifle cartridges, a ham in its canvas wrapping, and a box of cheap jewelry. As the litter accumulated the bee-keepers looked at one another with increasing amazement.

"We must get to the bottom of this!" Bob exclaimed, and he got bodily into the hole and began to throw the contents out upon the floor.

There was a heavy, unopened wooden box, marked to contain two dozen cans of salmon, two sides of bacon, a little damp and moldy, a bolt of muslin, and a box of new revolvers.

"Whoop-ee!" shouted Sam, unable to contain himself. "Ain't dis de best yet? We-all kin start a store! Glory! Mr. Joe, dis here Old Dick's cabin is shore 'nuff one lucky place!"

"Yes, Robinson Crusoe never made a haul like this!" laughed Carl; but Bob did not laugh. His face was dark and frowning as he groped after the hidden stores.

It took some time to turn the contents of the "cellar" entirely out, and then the cabin looked like a general store after a whirlwind. There must have been hundreds of dollars worth of merchandise of every description, from canned tomatoes to gold watches, nearly all in unopened packages, and in many cases bearing the stenciled addresses of firms in villages along the upper river.

"What does it all mean?" cried Alice. "Old Dick never put all this stuff there."

"Can't you guess?" said Joe, who had guessed already. "Warehouse thieves. River pirates. Blue Bob."

"That 's it," said Bob curtly.

"Oh!" Alice gasped; and Sam's jaw dropped at the name of the river outlaw whom he had encountered once.

The Harmans had heard a good deal that winter of the depredations of gangs of thieves along the river, who had been robbing freight

warehouses at the boat landings. Many of these warehouses are at uninhabited points on the shore, built of plank and protected only by a padlock, though occasionally containing valuable goods for a day or two after the steamer's arrival. Blue Bob and his houseboat men were reputed to have been active at these piracies, but they had worked so cunningly that no one could prove it, though ambushes and traps had been set.

"That 's it, beyond a doubt," said Joe. "This must be where they stored their loot. You see, the bees were their guards. Nobody but a bee-man would ever have dared to come up around the cabin. They spread the word that these bees were man-eaters. They must have had to come up here at night themselves. It 's the safest place imaginable. No wonder they did n't want us to settle here!"

"Then Candler must be one of that river gang!" Carl exclaimed.

"Not a doubt of it. At least he 's somehow connected with them."

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" asked Carl, after a dubious silence.

"Le 's pack all dis here stuff in de flat boat, an' git away quick," Sam proposed.

"And leave the bees? Not much!" returned Bob. "No, we must put all this plunder back, cover it up again, and never make a word or sign to show that we know it 's there. If those fellows think we know nothing about the stuff and are going away in a month or two, they may let us go in peace. I think we 'd better ship the packages of bees a little earlier than we intended, and—"

"What 's that? Listen!" exclaimed Joe; after a moment of tense silence he tiptoed to the window.

The others crowded after him. Bob choked a startled exclamation. Beside the bayou a large boat was drawn up, and three men were starting up the slope. Candler was in the rear, and both Bob and Joe instantly recognized the man in the lead. So did Sam, for they heard his dispairing ejaculation.

"Blue Bob! Oh, my golly!"

Joe wheeled, sweeping a glance at the plunder littered about the cabin.

"The worst minute they could have come!" he

exclaimed. "We must n't let them get a look in here. Alice, you must stay out of sight. Get the guns, quick. Don't be scared. We 're too many for 'em!"

All the firearms were in the cabin, by good luck, and the three white boys picked them up and stepped outside, shutting the door. The intruders were coming up without paying much attention to the flying bees, which were not vicious that day. The boys hurried down to meet them with the most indifferent expression they could assume, and Joe gave them a pleasant "Howdy!"

Blue Bob did not reply to the greeting. He tucked his repeating rifle under his arm, and fixed a fierce gaze upon the apiarists.

"You-all ain't gone yit!" he cried harshly. "Well, you 're sure goin' now, an' right quick, too!"

"What 's the matter with you?" said Joe soothingly. "You did n't really expect us to leave, did you?"

"We won't anyway!" put in Carl, hotly. "We 've got a right here, and you can't make us—"

"Hush up!" returned the pirate, with a violent thrust of his rifle-muzzle into Carl's stomach, so violent that the boy doubled up, staggered a couple of yards, and tumbled. Blue Bob strode past him. Joe threw up his own rifle, but met Candler's muzzle leveled upon him.

"Don't you start nothin', now!" Candler growled. "Keep still if you don't want to be hurted."

The boys stood irresolute for a fatal minute. Blue Bob walked straight to the cabin, and was about to step upon the little veranda when the screened window-frame swung open, and Alice appeared inside. She looked white but determined, and she was training her long target pistol straight upon the intruder's chest.

"Stop where you are!" she commanded. "One step f-farther, and I 'll certainly s-shoot!"

The blue-faced man stopped with a startled jerk. He gazed in astonishment at Alice behind her pistol, and then broke into a short laugh.

"Don't shoot, ma'am," he said. "I reckon I ain't a-comin' in."

He wheeled about, and walked back to where Candler and Joe were still glaring at one another.

"Put down your guns," he said. "And look here, you boys, you take that girl away from here, you hear me? This ain't no game for women. If you fellers want to stay and fight us—"

"We don't want to fight anybody," interrupted Joe. "You started this. Look here, we're going away in a month or so, just as soon as the honey season is over."

"I reckon you'll have to git out quicker 'n that," said Blue Bob. If it had n't been for that girl we 'd have pitched you into the bayou to-day."

"We'll burn your cabin," put in Candler. "We'll smash your boat. We'll turn you into the swamps to starve."

"We sure will," the leader agreed. "You-all think 'bout it. We'll give you another chance, but if you ain't gone when we come back by here next—"

With a last ferocious glare the river-man turned back to his boat, followed by the crew. They rowed down toward the river, and the boys watched them out of sight, and then returned triumphant to the cabin. Alice, pale but elated, still clutched her pistol.

"You certainly saved the day for us, Alice,"

said Joe. "That fellow would have been inside in another minute and seen all this plunder, and then it would have been all up with us. But now I do believe we 've got them bluffed out, in spite of their ferocious talk."

"I saw them glance at one another when Joe said we were leaving in a month," said Carl.

"That fetched them."

"Well, I certainly won't leave until the blackberry honey-flow is over—yes, and the tupelo, too," said Alice. "It means hundreds of dollars worth of honey to extract."

"Yes," said Bob, grimly. "We may as well extract all we can—and then ship all the bees away, and melt up the combs into wax, and burn up the hives. For if we once leave here, we 'll never come back and find any apiary."

CHAPTER XIV

UNDER FIRE

THERE was a half minute of dismayed silence at this pronouncement.

"I 'm afraid Bob 's right," said Joe. "If we go away from here those river pirates will surely destroy everything we 've left and burn the cabin too, to make sure that we won't come back."

"But I won't give up these bees!" Alice rebelled. "We 've worked too hard for them. Melt up all these beautiful new combs? Never!"

But nobody found any comfort for her. What Joe had said was plainly only too true.

"Well, let 's hide all this loot away," said Carl glumly at last. "We 've probably got a month to work in, anyhow."

They restored the pirates' treasure to its former hiding-place, and Bob nailed the boards down. Nobody spoke much; they were all de-

pressed. They might have a month's grace indeed; they might take off some honey and ship some packages of bees; but the notion of being compelled to tear all this well-established and valuable apiary to pieces, saving only the fragments, was bitterly distasteful to all of them.

Alice had appeared lost in deep meditation for some time. At last she broke out, with an air of new resolution.

"I 'm simply not going to give all this up!" she announced. "Look here, why can't we ship this whole outfit North?"

"Well, we 're going to ship what we can," said Bob.

"No, I mean to ship bees, hives, combs, and all. Ship the colonies as they stand. Send a car-load of hives of bees by freight."

They all looked at her in astonishment.

"A freight-car holds three or four hundred hives," remarked Bob, who had made a study of the different methods of shipping bees before he came South. "And the car would cost us four hundred dollars. We have n't bees enough to make it pay—and we have n't the money if we had."

"Well, I 've thought all that out," Alice argued. "As soon as the honey flow is over we could ship our bees on the steamboat up to the nearest railway point—Selma, is n't it? There we could split up each of our hives into three, and in about three weeks they 'd be built up strong enough again to ship. Then they 'd have a few weeks more in Canada to breed up before the clover came in bloom, and by that time they 'd all be roaring big colonies. Just think what three hundred of them would do on the Ontario clover in a good season! Why, they 'd make three thousand dollars' worth of honey at least. What if it does cost four hundred dollars to ship them?"

The boys contemplated this dazzling prospect for a moment in silence.

"I always said you were a genius and that you 'd either make us rich or break us," Carl remarked. "But this looks like a pretty wild gamble."

"So it did when we bought the bees in the North," his sister retorted. "But was n't I right?"

"But think," Bob interposed. "It sounds good, but we 'd have to buy the queens for making

up nearly two hundred fresh colonies. No time to rear 'em ourselves then. And then in Canada we 'd have to have equipment for all these bees—supers for three hundred colonies, excluders, a world of stuff. A thousand dollars would n't see us through it. We simply have n't got the capital to risk—for we 've got to live ourselves, you know, while we wait for the honey crop."

"None of you have got any nerve!" Alice flashed, almost ready to cry with disappointment; but Joe broke in with what he had been meditating.

"Look here!" he said. "When I was up at the plantation Uncle Louis told me that he 'd seen Burnam, and Burnam said that I could get four or five hundred dollars if I needed it bad. I left word for him that I did need it—and now maybe that 'll help us to put Alice's scheme through!"

"Oh, Joe, that 's splendid of you!" cried the girl, with a grateful glance at her cousin which he considered worth several hundred dollars.

"Not a bit!" Joe responded, flushing and slightly embarrassed. "It 's a business proposition. I want to invest. This apiary game just suits me."

"Then we can do it!" Alice exclaimed. "Yes, and we 're forgetting our honey crop here. We 'll surely get fifty pounds to the colony. That 'll come to nearly five hundred dollars by the time we want to leave."

"Yes!" cried Carl, "and we 're forgetting all that wax we shipped away, and what we 'll get from the cappings when we extract. About two hundred pounds. That 'll supply nearly all the foundation we 'll need in the North."

"We do seem to have overlooked a lot of assets," said Bob, "especially Joe. I 'd hate to urge you, Joe, but if you want to invest in the game, why, we 'll all be delighted. But it 's a risk, you know, and a bad season might run us all into bankruptcy right at the start."

"I know," said Joe. "I 'll take the chance. I 'll bet it 's no worse a gamble than turpentining. When 'll I need to get the money?"

"Oh, not for some time," said Alice. "We 've to get our honey extracted here, and I must set to work raising Italian queens—just as soon as the breeding queens come that we 've ordered."

The council broke up in great enthusiasm for the big enterprise, and they all went back to the

bee work with renewed energy. Sam was set to work at cutting every bee-tree that could be found in the neighborhood, for, since the whole outfit was going North, every bee was precious. Meanwhile the boys nailed up all the rest of the frames and made up every remaining scrap of lumber into hives. Carl even proposed taking the boards off the cabin for hive-making.

Luckily the queens arrived the next day, brought up by the clerk of the steamer—a package of a dozen wood-block mailing-cages, each containing an Italian thoroughbred queen with her escort of half a dozen bees who fed her and attended her en route. Alice had several colonies prepared to receive them, and she at once introduced the new-comers to the hives they were in future to occupy. One of them was promptly killed by the bees, who sometimes make difficulties about accepting a strange queen; but the rest survived, and as soon as they had begun to deposit eggs Alice began preparations for rearing more queens from this stock.

Alice was no novice at queen-rearing, the most delicate and difficult branch of apiculture, for she had reared nearly all the Italian queens for their

old apiary in the North. Within a week operations were in full blast. Batch after batch of queen-cells, a dozen at a time, were secured by depriving a strong colony of its queen, producing in them an immediate desire to raise a fresh one. Each of these cells she "grafted" with a tiny larva hatched from one of the new Italian eggs, and the prepared cells were then given to another colony to feed and finish. In this manner, with luck, it would not take long to raise enough queens to Italianize the whole outfit.

During this time they neither saw nor heard anything of the river-men, and they made an attempt to go on with their work without thinking of danger. It was not so easy, for there was a perpetual strain of nervousness. The boys kept the rifles and shotgun always loaded and handy, and Alice took to carrying her pistol strapped to her waist when she left the cabin. As a further precaution they placed half a dozen of the most vicious-tempered colonies of bees directly in front of the door, and with the cabin thus enveloped all day in a flying cloud of irritable bees, they felt fairly safe from attack.

The river pirates were still on the island, how-

ever, for several times the report of a gun reverberated over from the distant swamps. Venturing to reconnoiter in the boat, Joe and Sam even sighted their camping-place, on a dry bank nearly a mile up the bayou. No one was in sight about the rough shelter of bark and palmetto, nor about the almost dead fire, and the boys did not make a close investigation but dropped silently down to their own territory.

Meanwhile the honey flow from the dewberry was over, and the blackberry flow was waning fast. The Harmans were disappointed in the result. Compared with their Northern experiences, the supers had filled up slowly. The Italian strain had not yet had time to tell, and the "swamp bees" were inferior workers.

"We 're not going to get half the crop we expected," said Bob, disgustedly. "Instead of ten barrels, we 'll be lucky to get three."

"But there 's the tupelo and black-gum bloom to come yet," Alice said.

"But we dare n't wait for them," Bob reminded her. "It 's the last of April. The bees have got to be in Canada in a month at most, and we 've got to split them up and ship them, besides ex-

tracting this honey—and—and more things than I can think of."

"Something 'll happen to bring it all right," said Alice, optimistically. "It always does."

But, so far as the blackberry-honey was concerned, there was no use in delaying the extracting any longer. They would have to take what they could get, as Carl said; and fortunately the dewberry and blackberry-honey was normally so light-colored that they counted on getting a better price for it than for the later and darker honeys.

The boys made a stand for the extractor from a couple of bee-hives, bolted and nailed it solidly, brought in two of the empty barrels, and knocked the head out of one of them for an uncapping-tank. They went over the cabin carefully, and closed all possible cracks where robber bees might get in, and late in the afternoon Carl brought in the combs from two supers so that they could begin work at once in the morning.

They began immediately after an early breakfast. Joe had never seen honey extracted before, and he volunteered to stay in the building and turn the extractor, while Bob and Carl, veiled and gloved, went between the cabin and the bee-yard,

bringing in full combs and carrying out emptied ones. Sam stood ready for odd jobs, heavily armored against stings, and divided between excitement at actually seeing honey by the barrelful and alarm at facing a hundred colonies of robbed bees.

Alice, as usual, had volunteered to do the uncapping. She took up one of the great, full combs of honey, sealed white and smooth as a board, and rested it on the edge of the uncapping-barrel. With the heavy, razor-edged honey-knife she sliced off the sealed surface, first on one side and then on the other, and handed the opened comb to Joe to put into the extractor. When four combs were uncapped he began to turn the machine, and the whirling reel slung the honey out in streams against the side of the tin. Carl had come in with more combs, and he lingered to see the result, finally drawing off a cupful from the gate at the base of the extractor.

"I thought blackberry-honey was water-clear!" he complained. "Just look at this!"

It was far from clear, being yellowish-brown, rather thin and not possessing any great aroma or flavor.

"Not much like clover-honey," Alice admitted, after sampling it. "Just a dead sweet. There must be titi and willow and all sorts of things in it besides blackberry. I suppose there are too many sorts of blooms at once in these swamps to get any honey pure. Oh, well, it 'll bring ten cents in these days of high prices, so don't make fun of it, Carl, but go out and bring some more of it in."

"Dunno what you-all grumblin' 'bout," said Sam, who had now secured the cup. "Dis yere 's de bestest honey I ever tasted."

He swallowed the remainder of the cupful, and meanwhile Alice was uncapping a fresh set of combs. Little by little the honey accumulated in the bottom of the extractor. Sam at last drew it off by pailfuls and poured it through a cloth strainer into another empty barrel, which would serve as a storage-tank. Slowly the heavy, dark, sweet stuff crept up in this barrel, and it was full, with nearly a hundred pounds left in the extractor, when they heard the whistle of the river steamer down the stream.

Bob took off his veil and went out hurriedly in the row-boat to instruct the boat to call on the

way back to pick up the shipment of honey. He had to wait nearly an hour off the bayou mouth before the steamer came up, and meanwhile the others stopped work. Now that they were fairly started, another full day seemed likely to see the extracting finished.

Alice had to camp out of doors that night, for the cabin was sticky with honey, strewn with scraps of wax and crawling with bees that had been brought in accidentally with the honey. But they started work very early the next morning, skimmed the tank of honey, and set Sam at transferring its contents into one of the shipping-barrels. When this was filled they drove the bung home and rolled the ponderous object with some difficulty outside the cabin.

Extracting went on faster that day, but by night they had only two more barrels filled and prepared for shipment, and there was still a good deal of honey on the hives. In fact, it took another whole day to finish it, and at the end they had five barrels standing in a row outside the cabin. These held considerably more than three thousand pounds, though they had no means of ascertaining the exact weight.

"Worth maybe three hundred dollars," Bob commented, doubtfully, "with freight to be deducted from that. Not what we counted on, by a long way."

"Never mind!" said Joe. "I 'll try to screw more out of Burnam."

The steamer would not return for two or three more days. She would carry the honey down to Mobile, and when she came up next she would leave a barge at the bayou mouth on which the bees would be loaded, to be later transported to a point from which they could be hauled to the railway. The days of the River Island apiary were growing few, but the really big enterprise was just about to begin. And it was an enterprise for which they were quite inadequately supplied with funds, as they realized more than ever since the disappointing result of the honey crop.

Alice was looking after her new queens the next day, with Joe acting as her assistant, and the others were variously engaged about the rear of the cabin, when with startling suddenness there was a heavy "thud!" close at hand, followed

by a distant explosion and an echo over the swamp.

"Duck! That was a rifle shot!" exclaimed Joe, dragging Alice down behind the bee-hives. He heard an exclamation from Bob; then there was dead silence. He could not make out where the shot had been fired. He expected more to follow, and for some fifteen minutes they all remained close under cover. Then Carl dodged toward the cabin-door, evidently to secure a weapon, but he stopped short and uttered a lamentable cry of dismay.

Joe took a chance, and went to see what had happened. One of the barrels of honey had been shot through and through with a large-caliber bullet, and it now stood in a great dark, sticky pool.

"Plug it, quick!" Carl exclaimed.

But it was too late. Down to the level of the bullet-hole the honey had run out, more than three-fourths of the barrel. Alice had hurried up, and Bob also approached, and they looked at the loss in anger and dismay.

"Go around behind the shack, Allie," Bob

ordered. "That fellow may shoot again. And we 've got to protect these other barrels. Build a breastwork around 'em, or we won't have anything to ship."

Expecting another shot at every moment, the boys dragged up logs and heaped earth to make a bullet-proof fortification around the precious barrels. But no more shots were fired at that time, and they retreated at last behind the cabin, leaving the honey protected.

"I 'll be powerfully glad when this honey gets away on the boat!" said Bob, wiping his brow. "There 's another fifty dollars gone out of our assets."

"I 'll be powerfully glad when we get this whole outfit away from here," responded Joe. "Those pirates are getting impatient to have us go."

They felt uneasy about exposing themselves during the rest of the afternoon. Carl took Bob's rifle and ensconced himself at a good viewpoint, to give a return shot if another came. But all remained quiet until just at dusk, when the distant marksman tried his hand again. He fired six shots, and pieces of wood and spurts of

earth flew all around the honey-barrels, but the log rampart kept them from being perforated. The shooter was so well ambushed that it was only at the last shot that Carl detected the flash, coming from a clump of small pines three hundred yards away across the bayou. He retaliated with one shot at the place but got no reply, and Bob dissuaded him from further shooting. A battle was the last thing they wanted just then.

They spent a nervous night, taking turns to stand guard, but the sniper gave no more trouble. The next day the steamboat came down, considerably earlier than they had expected her, and the boys rolled the honey-barrels down the hill, into the flatboat, and poled out to the river. They came back after shipping the honey, reporting that the boat would be back in four days and had promised to leave an empty barge for the loading of the bees.

"Now if those pirates just let us alone for another week we 'll be all right," said Bob. "The honey 's safely off, anyway. So much to the good."

The boat had also brought them a roll of wire screen, and they began to cut this into strips to

be nailed over the hive-entrances for shipping. There was little that could be done with the bees now; Alice ventured to proceed a little with requeening operations, but for the most part they could only wait for the return of the steamer. A heavy rain fell, breaking off the honey flow, and it was followed by chilly north winds. With no honey to gather, the bees were intensely cross, stinging viciously and trying to rob one another's hives.

A few days of peace had lulled their fears somewhat, but the next night Joe was awakened out of a sound slumber by a shriek in his ears. A red glare struck his eyes as he opened them.

"Fire!" Carl was yelling. "It 's the bee-yard!"

Everybody was rushing out, half-dazed and in an uproar of confusion. A sheet of flame seemed to be driving right over the apiary, fanned by a fresh breeze. A second glance showed them that the conflagration was in the huge pile of dry blackberry-canes and rubbish from the clearing up of the gum-yard, which they had piled back of the apiary. No hives were yet afire, but the ones nearest the flames were scorch-

ing, and the terrified bees were rushing out in thousands.

"Grab the buckets! Run to the spring, Sam!" Joe shouted, and he rushed up almost under the flames, seized the imperiled hive bodily, and carried it away. Carl rescued another, as Sam came back with water and dashed it hissing on the fire, without much effect. There were only two small buckets and the spring was too far away.

One hive caught fire before they could save it, and burned fiercely with a flare of beeswax, until a great gush of honey smothered the flame. Alice was throwing sand in an attempt to choke the fire; the boys, dashing in, moved hive after hive; but within a few minutes the light blaze of the berry-canes began to die down. It was like a fire of straw, and it went out as fast as it had arisen. Flame ceased to drift over the hives, and presently there was only a great glow of rapidly fading embers.

"Safe, I guess," said Bob with relief.

"That was those men again!" cried Alice, choking with anger. "I did n't think they 'd do

such a thing. They tried to burn up our bees. I wish we 'd shot them!"

"I expect they thought the hives would burn easier than they did. We 're lucky to have lost only one," said Joe. "I wonder what they 'll start next."

They watched and listened nervously, as the remains of the fire went blackly out. But there was no sound except the hooting of owls from the swamps, the plaintive cry of a raccoon, and the uneasy roaring and rumbling of the disturbed bees. But none of the young apiarists felt like sleeping any more.

"I 'm hungry," said Carl. "These midnight alarms are wearing on the system."

They were all hungry, and they ate cold corn-bread and cold rabbit and drank coffee before finally lying down to rest once more. Twice Joe imagined he heard some suspicious sound during the night, and crept out with his rifle; but both alarms proved false. It was a badly broken night for the bee-keepers, and they were all tired and heavy-eyed and inclined to be nervous and despondent the next morning.

There was a little honey flow that day, and the

bees were getting enough to keep them in good temper. But no work could be done with them, and their owners were all lounging on the shady side of the cabin, when, shortly before noon, a sudden outburst of firing rattled from the woods across the bayou. Two or three bullets thudded into the cabin; another perforated a beehive, and several more sang shrilly through the air. Then the fusillade stopped as sharply as it had begun.

It had taken only a few seconds, and the boys could not detect where the shots had come from. Everything relapsed into hot quiet again, and watching was of no use. Apparently the shots had been fired without much deadly intent, but merely to terrify. Late in the afternoon there was another sudden volley of four shots, coming from a different angle, and aimed into the bee-yard, and ceasing before they had time to make out even a puff of smoke.

"They 're not trying to hit us—only to scare us," said Joe. "Nothing to do but just stand it. We 'll be gone in a few days now. What I 'm most afraid of is that they 'll burn the cabin one of these nights."

"No danger of that. Remember, all their plunder is stored here," said Alice, wisely.

This was a fact, and a comforting one. Nevertheless they had no idea of sleeping unguarded that night, and Carl volunteered to stand sentry till midnight, when he would call Bob, who would in turn be relieved by Joe. They all remained awake later than usual, and it was almost ten o'clock when Carl took up his solitary position, sitting on one of the superfluous honey-barrels, his shotgun across his knees, where he could command both the cabin and the bee-yard. There was faint light from the crescent moon, but the air was full of silvery mist, lying heavily in the hollows of the swamps and on the bayou.

Except for the intermittent, customary noises of wild life from the woods, an hour passed in quiet. Carl walked around the cabin once or twice, returned to his place, looked at his watch. It was somewhat past eleven o'clock when he caught a faint, unmistakable dip and splash from the stream. His heart jumped. He made it out again, and thought he even heard a low sound of voices. A boat was coming down the bayou.

Instantly he wakened the other boys. With

intermittent, excited whispering they listened, and then disposed themselves behind the tree-clumps in front of the cabin, with guns cocked and each of them strung up to hair-trigger pitch.

The boat came opposite. They could distinctly hear the low mutter of gruff voices, but the mist concealed it entirely from view. The boys expected to hear a landing made; but the rowers went past without stopping. The splash of oars and the voices died down in the distance, going out toward the river.

"Why, they 're not coming here!" Bob whispered, in amazement.

The boat had gone out of hearing. The boys were astonished and almost disappointed, after being keyed up to the point of fighting the thing out at last.

"Maybe they 'll come back," Carl suggested.

But, though they waited in keen expectation for an hour, nothing more was heard. Toward one o'clock they attempted to resume their rest, with Bob on guard. When he called Joe at three o'clock all had been quiet, and Joe finished the night without disturbance. The boat had not returned up the bayou.

Alice had slept through it all, and had to be given the whole sensational story when she appeared the next morning.

"Perhaps they 've gone for good!" she exclaimed. "Or maybe they 've started on one of their plundering expeditions. All that shooting and burning was just to terrorize us—to keep us intimidated till they get back."

"The boat 'll leave the barge here to-day, if she 's on time," said Joe. "What luck if they did n't get back till we had the bees all moved, and they 'd come back to find the place empty!"

"Too good to be true!" Bob commented. "I 'd give a good deal to have them stay away for a week just now. But we don't know that they 've really gone anywhere. They may have got back to their camp through some other channel in the swamps—most likely they have."

At any rate, that day passed without any attack, and late in the afternoon the steamboat did come up the river, and left the great, flat-bottomed barge moored to a tree at the mouth of the bayou. The barge would easily carry the whole apiary. The bees would have to be taken

down to it by means of their own flatboat, a dozen at a time, but there was no hurry about beginning this task. The steamer would not be back for four days, and the bees must not be kept shut up in the hives an hour longer than necessary. The loading could be done in a single day, and it would be time enough to begin in two or three days more.

It would be a simple matter, provided they were not molested in the operation, and the problem of whether their enemies had really gone away temporarily was a most important one. It grew to weigh upon them so heavily that they decided at last to solve it; and Joe, Bob, and Sam started in the boat upon a reconnoitering trip up the bayou.

Half a mile from the apiary they turned aside into the smaller channel they had followed before, and within another half-mile they came in sight of the camping-ground of the pirates that they had seen from a distance. Nobody was in sight; and they ventured to land with great precaution and with weapons ready.

But the camp was really deserted. There had

been no fire for at least twenty-four hours, and not a particle of any sort of outfit was left about the palmetto shelter.

"Looks as if they 've really gone," said Bob delightedly.

"Whar you reckon dey 've left dat old house-boat?" queried Sam. "You reckon dey ever got it back?"

"You can bet they did!" Joe returned. "I expect it 's hidden somewhere in these swamps. Maybe that 's where the gang has gone, in fact."

"You don't suppose they 've put it back in the place where we located it before?" said Bob.

It seemed hardly likely. However, after a careful but fruitless search all over the deserted camp, they paddled back through the swampy, stagnant channel, back to the main bayou, and proceeded further upwards. They were sharply on the lookout all the way, and when at last they came to the screen of dense branches and vines that almost curtained the water, they parted the greenery cautiously and peered through.

But that well-hidden nook held no houseboat this time. Pushing ahead, they landed on the shore where they had found the outfit for melting

down the rosin. Nothing was left of it now but a stray scrap of rosin-soaked burlap, and a spot of ash where the kettle had stood.

"Looks as if nobody had been here since," Joe commented, looking about.

There was a heavily-worn place on a tree where the hawser of the houseboat must have been tied up many times, but there were no fresh foot-marks about the place, and no sign of anybody having visited it recently. They beat about through the dense thickets, however, in all directions back from the water. They found nothing except an old shovel that might have been lying there for weeks; Joe and Bob were already turning back to the boat, feeling more secure than they had felt for many days, when Sam stopped them with a cry.

He had pushed further back among the titi-thicket, and was now standing still, his head thrown back, sniffing the air like a hound.

"Mr. Joe!" he exclaimed, "I shore does smell rosin!"

CHAPTER XV

THE TREASURE OF ROSIN

THIS was exactly what Sam had said when they had arrived here before. He had been right then, but now Joe laughed.

"I reckon not, Sam," he said. "That rosin 's far away from here."

"I dunno," Sam muttered, still sniffing. He pushed forward into the dense shrubbery, poked about a few minutes, and then uttered a loud yell. Before the boys could turn back he emerged, trundling a battered wheelbarrow, caked with dirty rosin—the identical wheelbarrow that Joe had discovered in the river orchard. He recognized it at once.

"But this was n't much to smell, Sam. Can't you do better than that?" laughed Bob. "Not much rosin on this."

"Dis here was n't what I done smelt—no suh,

Mr. Bob," replied the negro. "Smelt somethin' heap powerfuler 'n dis—yes-suh."

He sniffed again, growing serious and intent. Neither of the white boys could smell anything, but a negro sometimes has wonderful olfactories. Sam dived into the thicket again; they could hear him crashing about, out of sight. A long, green whip-snake bolted from his feet. He penetrated deeper, stopped, threshed about for a minute, and then they heard him calling in a startled voice:

"Mr. Joe, come dis way! Come 'long quick!"

The boys rushed after him, tearing through the dense tangle of shrubs and interlacing vines. Sam stood with his head thrust into a particularly dense thicket of tall, close-growing titi-shrubs, and the boys parted the shrubs and looked also.

To their astonishment, the thicket was hollow. The whole interior of it had been cut out, and the open space was occupied by a great mound of rubbish—the lopped-off shrubs, leaves, vines, palmetto-tops, partly dead, partly showing still green.

"What on earth?" Bob muttered, puzzled.

But Joe, with an energetic exclamation,

plunged forward and flung the cut branches aside. A piny smell came out. A cascade of brown lumps rattled down, great fragments of brown and amber, caked with bark and pine-needles.

"The rosin, by jingo!" Joe shouted.

"Whoop-ee, Mr. Joe! Told you I smelt it!" shrieked Sam. "Knew we 'd fin' dat ole rosin one of dese days!"

"Found it, sure enough!" Bob exclaimed, scarcely less excited. "But, gracious, what a lot!"

The interior of the thicket must have been thirty feet square, and it was heaped up with the masking layer of chopped shrubs and creepers. The boys poked into it at different points, and found rosin everywhere. There was no delusion this time. Here were the whole contents of the river orchard "mine," the rosin from the old Marshall distillery, come back to the descendants of the family at last.

"I knowed we 'd find it!" Sam exulted. "I ain't said nothin', but I knowed we 'd find dat rosin. You done said you 'd give me a thousand dollars if we got ten thousand dollars' worf.

Don't you reckon dey 're a thousand barrels dere, Mr. Joe?"

"You deserve it, for we 'd never have found it but for you," said Joe. "But there isn 't a thousand barrels there—nothing like it. There sure is an enormous lot, though. Now this sets us safe," he added, turning to Bob. "Burnam said he 'd go halves with me on it. He never thought then that I 'd locate it, and neither did I. But he 'll let me handle his half too—I know he will—as an advance on what he owes me. This saves the bee speculation. Hurrah!"

"Look here, Joe, we can't let you risk all this —" Bob began.

"Nonsense! I want to buy into this bee game," Joe laughed. It 's the best investment I know. Besides, this stuff really belongs to you, I reckon, as much as it does to me. It was your grandfather, too, that made it. But how are we going to get away with it? Suppose Blue Bob's boat came up the bayou this minute!"

"Oh, lordy!" Sam muttered.

"Let's cover it up again and get away," Bob suggested. "We 'll talk it over. But you bet we 'll get it out somehow."

They carefully replaced the covering of brush and leaves upon the pile of rosin, and retreated, taking pains to efface their traces as far as possible. Once in the boat again, they made all speed back to the apiary; they dreaded at every turning to encounter the returning river-men, and they were intensely relieved when they reached the old cabin without seeing any one or being seen.

Alice and Carl were waiting anxiously for them, and they poured out the news of their discovery—news of such importance that it temporarily swamped every other interest.

"Oh, Joe! It 's splendid of you to want to put all that into the bees!" Alice exclaimed. "I feel as if we should n't let you, but I can't resist the temptation."

"Don't worry. You could n't hinder me. But remember, we have n't got it yet," Joe returned. "Those men might come back at any moment."

"Evidently they 've had it here all this time," said Bob. "We might have found it the first time we struck that place if we 'd had more time to look. We thought they 'd finished melting up

the rosin, but they must have only commenced. They didn't dare to do it while we've been here, so they covered it up and hid it. No wonder they've been in a hurry for us to move!"

"But can we sell the stuff in the rough, just as it is?" Carl asked.

"Oh, yes," Joe assured him. "Of course, we wouldn't get quite so much as if it were refined, but any turpentine-camp will buy it. We might send it to Harper's camp about half-way down to Mobile. I know Harper, and he'll treat us right on it."

"But how'll we get it there?" Carl exclaimed.

This was the crux of the question. For some moments there was silence, while they pondered.

"I've been thinking of that," said Joe, slowly. "So far as I can see, the only way will be to load it into that barge down by the river and have the steamboat take it when she comes back."

"Ship the rosin instead of the bees?" cried Alice.

"Well, that rosin may be worth three or four thousand dollars," Joe argued. "The bees aren't worth half that. Besides, we've got to seize our chance while those pirates are away.

Even if they came back we could still ship the bees. The chances are that they won't trouble to dig into that rosin heap till they know we're gone. If we ship the bees first and have to wait for the boat to come back, I don't believe we'd ever get a chance at the rosin; but if we can get the rosin off now, I think we can be almost sure of getting away with both. Of course, it's a chance. I'll do whatever you-all think."

They talked it over at great length, but Joe's reasoning seemed sound. The rosin was too big a thing to risk losing.

"Another thing," Joe added. "The river boats aren't usually very heavily loaded when they come down-river at this time of year. There's every chance that they can load our bees aboard somewhere, or part of them anyway, so that they can go with the rosin."

"Suppose those pirates turned up just as we were carrying off the plunder!" Carl suggested.

"Nothing to do then but defend ourselves," said Bob with determination. "We're as many as they are, after all, and as well armed. I'd say, *fight!*"

"Fight it is!" Joe agreed. "But I hope it won't

come to that. I believe our luck will hold a little longer."

"Well, there 's no time to lose in getting started. It 'll take us goodness knows how long to raft that stuff down the bayou in our flat-boat. And the steamer 'll be back in two or three days," said Bob.

"We can save some trouble by towing the barge as far as possible up the bayou," Joe proposed. "Yes, we ought to start right away."

Nothing else but this last, biggest chance of all was talked of during the rest of the morning and while they prepared and ate dinner. It was a risk; there was danger in it indeed. Nobody was disposed to back out, and yet they hesitated to start. However, after dinner the boys all went down to the river and, with immense labor, towed and poled the big barge up the bayou and moored it below the bee-yard. Beyond that the channel was too crooked and narrow for its passage.

This took them until nearly the middle of the afternoon, and then, without debate, they took the final plunge. Alice declined to be left alone at the cabin, so they all got into the flat boat and

poled up the bayou until they reached the hiding-place of the treasure. Tying up the boat, they landed. With an ax Bob rapidly cut a clear path through the jungle, and they ripped away the covering of brush from the rosin heap.

"Now we've cast the die!" said Joe. We've got to work hard and quick—day and night, if necessary—until this stuff is all loaded. Alice'll stand guard for us. Sam, get out that wheelbarrow."

Luckily it was only a few yards from the rosin to the water. With the old shovel they had found, it was a mere matter of seconds to fill the wheelbarrow; Sam trundled it down to the bayou, and the first load of rosin went rattling into the boat.

Ripping away the cover of brush from the heap finally disclosed a second shovel, and this expedited matters. Sam was kept briskly trotting to and fro with the laden barrow. Carl, who had no shovel, made an attempt to scoop up the rosin with a piece of board; and Alice, after looking on for some time, went a little way down the stream and posted herself on guard, ready to give the alarm if a boat should be seen coming up.

The single wheelbarrow was the great hindrance. The white boys stood idle for half the time, while Sam was wheeling the load; nevertheless the flatboat slowly filled up. The cargo seemed to have taken scarcely a noticeable amount from the great pile.

"Gracious, there 's a powerful lot of the stuff!" exclaimed Carl.

"Dere shore is!" Sam chuckled. "Bet you has to give me dat thousand dollars, after all, Mr. Joe."

They all got aboard, standing uncertainly on the lumpy cargo, and navigated the flatboat down to the apiary and the barge. Here Sam and Carl hastily began to shovel the stuff into the bigger boat. Bob meanwhile went up to the cabin, where they heard sounds presently of sawing and hammering. Before the boys had completed the transfer of the cargo he came back, carrying a sort of stretcher—a shallow box with handles.

"It 'll be a heavy business, but it 'll help the wheelbarrow out," he remarked, as he exhibited it.

So it did. The box held about a hundred

pounds of the brown lumps, and with a boy carrying each end it doubled the speed of loading. The second filling of the flatboat was completed in far less time than the first, and again they floated down and shoveled the rosin into the barge. Everything had gone with wonderful smoothness so far; there was no sign of the river pirates' return and their confidence and hope increased with every wheelbarrow-load.

The sun was falling low over the swamps now, but they kept at work to the last spark of light, and brought down the last load in almost total darkness. While they were shoveling it into the barge, Alice went up to the cabin and prepared fried pork, corn-bread, and coffee.

"We 've made a big start, anyway," said Carl rejoicing as he ate.

"Yes, but only a start," returned Bob. "When does that steamboat come back? Day after to-morrow? It 'll take us all our time to get that stuff moved before to-morrow night."

"Why not tackle it again to-night?" Joe suggested. "We can make fires and torches to give us light enough to shovel by."

They were all tired, and gummed up with rosin,

but after they had eaten and rested for an hour the proposition seemed less unattractive. They took to the flatboat again, carrying torches of fat-pine, and at the treasure-place they lighted a fire of pine and lumps of rosin that gave out a smoky and lurid illumination. It was enough to shovel by, as Joe said, but it was a disquieting fact that the glare could be seen a long way off. However, if the river-men were anywhere in the vicinity they would be sure to come up within a few hours in any case, so the fire-light could do nothing but hasten the danger a little.

They kept their firearms handy while they worked, and half a dozen times there was a sudden alarm, a halt, and a hasty grabbing of guns. But these alarms all turned out false. They floated the load down to the barge without interruption, transferred it, and went back for another. This one also moved in safety, and their nervousness began to subside.

For hour after hour they worked, shoveling, poling, shoveling, carrying the heavy stretcher, in the hot, wet atmosphere of the swamp, in the orange glare of the rosin-fed fire. They streamed with sweat; mosquitoes buzzed in

clouds, but no one had time to notice them. Load after load went down the bayou and was shoveled into the barge, until, an hour after midnight, their endurance gave out.

"Better knock off," Bob advised. "No use overdoing it; and we've got a heavy day to-morrow."

They ate another late supper, nodding with exhaustion, barely able to keep awake. Carl suggested doubtfully that some one ought to stand sentry, but they were all too tired to care. They tumbled into their various couches, and went almost instantly to sleep. Joe felt that Carl's suggestion was right; he made a faint attempt to keep awake for some time, but he awoke suddenly with a start and found gray dawn in the air. It was morning; a heavy mist lay on the swamp and the bayou. Everything was undisturbed. The cabin had not been burned during the night, and the rest of his party were still soundly asleep.

He got up, feeling sore and stiff, and awakened the others. Breakfast was a rather silent and glum meal, but the influence of hot food and coffee spread by degrees through their muscles,

and they mustered up energy to attack the big task again.

They had made progress the night before. A great end of the rosin heap was gone, perhaps a third of it. And the barge was nearly half filled. It was doubtful if they would be able to take away the whole of the mound.

However, they set to work to get what they could. Stiffened muscles gradually suppled again, and they shoveled and wheeled, poled the boat and shifted the cargo, all through that hot, sticky morning. They struck work for an hour at noon, then attacked it again, doggedly determined to finish that afternoon. About four o'clock they stopped for more food. The furious work seemed to keep them always ravenously hungry.

"It 's a good thing we 're leaving presently," Alice remarked. "There 's just about provisions to last us. This is the end of the sugar."

"Plenty of honey," said Joe. We won't suffer for sweet anyhow."

A dash of rain came down that afternoon and cooled the air. By sunset the barge had about as much rosin as she could carry, Joe thought,

though there were still a good many cubic feet left in the pile. They ventured to bring down another boat-load, then another, and stopped for supper, undecided whether to continue after dark. But while they were eating they were all startled by a long, deep-toned murmur, like a vast echo, that seemed to rise from every direction upon the air.

"The steamboat, by jingo!" ejaculated Joe. "She 's a day ahead of her schedule this time."

"And we have n't got the barge down to the river. We 'll miss her!" Alice cried.

"Oh, she won't be along for hours yet," Joe reassured. "Plenty of time to finish supper, and then meet her. But this puts an end to mining out any more rosin."

"Don't you reckon we 've done a thousand barrels, Mr. Joe?" Sam demanded anxiously from the background, where he was eating corn-bread and honey.

"When it 's all melted down and barreled up it may make half that," the woods-rider answered. "Hard to guess. But is n't that good enough? It ought to bring three thousand dollars."

The far-away steamboat blew again as he was speaking. Growing anxious, Carl went up to the top of the ridge to look and listen. He reported that the wind was blowing the wrong way; the boat might be nearer than they thought, and he imagined he had caught a distant flash of her searchlight.

Accordingly they finished supper in a hurry and went down to get the barge off. The current would float it down, very slowly indeed, but certainly, and it would only have to be roped to the steamer's side. Bob remained at the cabin, to pack up the supplies. The chances were that the boat would be able to take bees and everything.

"I know these river boats," Joe said confidently. "She 's sure not to have much freight this trip, and she 'll wait all night while we bring the bees down. I 'd bet she 'd wait most of to-morrow too for that much cargo."

It would not take long to cover the hive-entrances with wire-gauze and take them down to the river on the flatboat, and during the absence of the others Bob busied himself with preparing the wire, tacks, and all necessary apparatus for

an instant move. Alice had gone with the rest to see the rosin shipped, and soon after the barge had disappeared down the dark bayou Bob heard the roar of the whistle much louder and nearer, and saw the unmistakable flash of the light, playing on the sky over the forest like summer lightning.

It was two hours, however, before the steamer finally blew her whistle deafeningly off the bayou. By the reflection of the lights Bob could see that she had stopped. She stayed there for perhaps half an hour; then, to his dismay, she roared a long blast and started again, her white light playing on the sky as she went down and around the River Island on her way to Mobile.

It was another half hour before he heard the sound of oars coming up the bayou. He went down to the shore cautiously. The boat pulled in, and Sam and Joe came ashore out of the darkness.

"Wouldn't she wait for the bees?" exclaimed Bob anxiously. "Where's Carl and Alice?"

"No, she would n't wait," replied Joe, in a strange voice. "She was loaded down with

freight; she could n't have carried a single bee-hive. That 's nothing. But she is n't coming back, Bob. This is her last trip."

"What?" cried Bob, incredulously.

"She 's to be laid up for a couple of months anyway. She has n't been paying lately, and there 's some labor trouble with the freight-handlers at the Mobile dock. The captain only got the word at Selma two days ago. No more boats on the river for the rest of this spring. I shipped the rosin down to Harper's camp. Carl goes with it, and I made Alice go too. For we 're stranded here, don't you see, Bob? We can't get away, not with the bees; and those pirates are going to be back directly."

Bob was silent, completely stunned with this catastrophe. Sam made the boat fast, and the three of them began to walk despondently up the slope to the cabin in the dark.

"Alice and Carl can get a car or buggy from Harper's up to Uncle Louis's," Joe continued. "Alice did n't want to go, but we made her. This is going to be too dangerous a place for any girl. There was n't time to arrange anything,

but Carl is going to see if he can't have help sent down to us—if we can only hold out till it comes."

They stopped outside the cabin. Dimly in the gloom they could see the pale outline of the rows of beehives, all full of good, straight, new combs and crowded with live bees—a valuable property which the boys had built up out of nothing.

"Those pirates are sure to be back within a day or two," Joe went on. "They 'll see how we 've looted the rosin, and then they 'll get us. But what are we to do? Can't go off and desert the bee-ranch."

"I should say not," cried Bob, clenching his fists. "I won't do that! We must n't be beaten now. Joe, we've just *got* to get these bees out of here right away, and down to the railroad!"

"I 'm with you. But how are we going to do it?" Joe returned.

Bob had no answer ready. Sam was building a fire and preparing to get supper. Away down the river the steamboat roared sullenly, echoing weirdly over the forests. They were all tired and unstrung with the reaction from that day and night of hard labor, and the wilderness

seemed desperately lonely, dangerous, and depressing. The corn-bread that Sam stirred up did not have the flavor of Alice's hands, and, worse still, there was very little of it left. The pork was almost gone too.

"We 'll have to do some hunting," said Joe, gloomily.

But the food question troubled them only slightly. It was the problem of getting the bees away that occupied their whole minds. They talked it over from every point of view without reaching any solution, until nearly ten o'clock. Then came a heavy downpour of rain that drove them into the cabin.

It was a torrential deluge that leaked through the cabin roof in a dozen places, but the cabin was at any rate better than the rough shelter outside. The rain slackened a little; they tried to sleep, but lay awake for a long time. Joe dozed at last, and awakened to hear the rain thundering in torrents on the roof again. A stream was falling on his legs. He got up, struck a match, and endeavored to find a less damp spot. Bob was soundly asleep, but Sam suddenly stole forward out of the corner where he had lain down.

"What 's the matter? Getting wet, Sam?" Joe inquired.

"No-suh, Mr. Joe, I don't min' dat none. I ain't been sleepin'. I been studyin'—bout dem bees, Mr. Joe. What I been studyin' on is dis. Why can't we-all make a sorter raft, an' float dem bees down to whar you-all wants 'em?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEE RAFT

"A RAFT?" said Joe, astonished. "Nonsense, Sam. Why, it would take a raft as big as the whole bee-yard."

"Plenty of dry cypress logs down yander, all 'long de bayou. We 'd mighty soon make a big raft," Sam persisted.

At this moment Bob also appeared out of the gloom, roused by the sound of talking.

"It might n't take such a big raft," he said. "We could pack the hives close together. I believe Sam 's hit on something. Can't we have a light?"

Joe thrust a few fragments of pine, and scraps of an old gum, sticky with wax and resin, into the fireplace, and struck a light. The leaky old cabin looked more cheerful as the flame flared up, and while the rain still roared on the roof they discussed the new scheme.

"Let 's figure how big a raft it would really take," said Joe, taking a bit of pencil and a piece of smooth board. "A hive is sixteen by twenty inches square."

A little calculation showed that the raft would need to be at least fifty feet long and twelve feet wide, to hold the bees, placed in four rows.

"But it 's only about thirty miles down to the place where we 'd want to land them," said Bob. "Then we 'll be only four miles from the railroad. Is n't that right? I should think we could float that far in one day. The river runs smoothly, and the bees would hardly know they were being moved. I don't think we 'd even need to close the hives. It 's a lot better way than the steamboat, and then think of all the freight we 'll save."

Sam chuckled jubilantly at this support.

"It 'd be a big job to build that raft," said Joe. "There 's plenty of timber and nails, to be sure, but what about lumber for joining and flooring it?"

"Tear this old cabin to pieces!" Bob exclaimed. "We won't need it any more."

"Good idea! That 'll certainly give us all the

boards we want," said Joe, and he laughed. "What a joke on Blue Bob, if he comes back here and finds the rosin, bees, and cabin all gone!"

The plan seemed more and more possible as they discussed it. The heavy rain ceased while they talked; the fire burned down, and they at last retired to their damp couches and slept. But they were up early in the morning, and, after a hasty breakfast, they went out to look over the resources of timber.

The morning was clear, and the sun came up brilliantly. The bayou had risen considerably with the rain and flowed with a muddy and perceptible current. As Sam had said, there were plenty of fallen cypress logs along the bayou, as well as dead standing trunks, and the sloping bank would make it easy to get them into the water.

"I vote that we try it," said Joe at last. "It seems to be our only chance to get away with the bees. We'll have to cut out the logs for the body of the raft first, and then pull down the cabin, rush the bees aboard, and start quick."

Without any delay they set to work, with muscles that had scarcely recovered from the

stiffness of loading the rosin. Unfortunately they had only one ax, but they kept that busy. For twenty minutes Sam chopped furiously, then passed the ax to Joe, who in turn relinquished it to Bob. Then, while one chopped, the others rolled logs into convenient places, and began to pull out nails from the cabin walls and make what other preparations they could.

By dinner-time they had cut up ten twelve-foot logs and rolled them down to the water. All that afternoon they toiled hard, and all the next day. They were haunted with the idea that Blue Bob and his men might return at this last, critical moment. The sound of the echoing ax was dangerous; it would surely draw the river-men if they were within hearing, and the boys kept nervously on the alert, never without a weapon at hand.

But they were not interrupted in any way, and in two days they had forty stout logs of dry cypress cut out, which, as Bob said, looked enough to float a church.

The next thing was to rip the boarding off the cabin. This was to be the final step, for it would

deprive them of shelter. It was too late to make any progress with it that evening, however.

"This may be our last chance to sleep," Bob remarked. "Let 's have supper and then make the most of a roof while we 've got it."

"Nothin' much for supper 'ceptin' corn-meal, an' mighty little of that," put in Sam, after inspecting the larder.

"Good thing we 're going to be away tomorrow," said Joe. "Break into that stuff under the floor and get a ham. There 's no time to hunt or fish now, and we 've got to have lots to eat, with all this heavy work."

Sam delightedly broke into the robbers' hoard in the "cellar" and unearthed a ham, from which he fried several large slices. It was a little musty, but it was better food than they had had for a day or two, and after devouring it they took Bob's advice and slept soundly, all of them being extremely tired.

With the next daylight they began the work of tearing down Old Dick's cabin. The boards were old, many of them were badly rotted, but most of them would serve in some way. Rapidly

they ripped them off with ax and hammer, until the building that had been so useful to them was a mere skeleton. It was then noon; they cooked more of the stolen ham, and, growing reckless, Bob delved into the buried hoard and brought up a tin of biscuits and a can of tomatoes.

"We can keep track of what we use, and settle for it later with—with somebody," he explained.

After eating, they laboriously carried the lumber down to the bayou, rolled half a dozen logs into the water, and began to put the raft together. It was a hot day, and the moist heat near the water was intense. Worried by mosquitoes and yellow-flies, soaked to the skin by constantly splashing into and out of the water, the boys labored and sweltered. They flung the boards across the logs and nailed them down as rapidly as possible, and the raft grew before their eyes. But it was going to be a bigger job than they had anticipated, and they had to stop at dark with only a third of the craft completed.

After seven hours of furious labor the next day they had laid all the flooring of the raft. Nothing was left now but to load the bees and the supplies; but they looked dubiously at the task of

With the next daylight they began the work of tearing down Old Dick's cabin

carrying more than a hundred two-story hives fifty yards down-hill to the water. It would take two of them to handle one hive, and they would have to walk slowly.

"Better sit down and rest for an hour," Bob advised.

They did rest for half an hour, but, tired as they were, they were nervously impatient to finish. The end was in sight, but they might still be caught at any moment, and the whole enterprise collapse in disaster and possibly in bloodshed.

Since the honey was extracted, the hives were not extremely heavy, but they were awkward to handle. According to Bob's suggestion, they had not closed the hive-entrances, and the bees had to be smoked to keep them from boiling out in a rage when their hives were lifted. It was with the greatest difficulty that they induced Sam to do his share of this ticklish and dangerous work; he was willing to carry double loads of anything else, but not bees; and, in fact, Joe and Bob did most of it. To preserve the balance they loaded the raft from each end, and by sunset a third of the apiary was on board. To their joy, the raft seemed to bear the weight buoyantly.

They rested for a little after supper, but they were determined to get the work finished that night, and they went at it again. Sam built a big blaze of pine and broken-up gums at the bee-yard and another beside the raft, where the bees murmured uneasily at the glare and disturbance. At eleven o'clock a hundred hives were aboard. Greatly encouraged now, they made coffee and rested for another half-hour; and by one o'clock every hive stood on the raft.

Carrying down their tools, bedding, and personal possessions, the honey extractor and the guns, they stowed them in the already crowded space.

"Got everything? Ready to go?" Joe demanded, gazing about the wreck of the cabin and apiary in the fire-glare.

"Got everything? Why, you-all ain't a-goin' leave all dis yere val'able stuff?" cried Sam wildly, indicating the pirates' treasure that had been under the floor, now laid open to the sky.

"I don't know. What do you say, Bob?" said Joe, undecidedly.

"Might as well take some of the most valuable stuff," Bob advised, at which Sam gave a yell of

delight. "Of course we 'll hand it over to the authorities when we get anywhere. It 's all marked with the name of the owner or shipper."

Sam's countenance fell heavily. However, they hastily picked out what appeared to be the most valuable portions of the stolen goods, put them into a couple of empty beehives, and carried them aboard. They fastened the rowboat by a scrap of rope to the stern of the raft. The flat-boat would have to be left in the bayou; they had no further use for it. Sam brought buckets of water and put out the fires.

"All ready now. All aboard!" cried Joe.

He tried to push the raft off with a pole. It scarcely stirred. It seemed fast to the place as if anchored. All the boys heaved their weight on poles, and at last, inch by inch, they got the heavy affair away from the shore and out into the channel. But even there the current seemed hardly capable of moving it.

"This 'll never do!" Bob cried in alarm. "It 'll take us two days to get out of the bayou at this rate."

"Heave hard on the poles," said Joe.

They poled vigorously against the muddy bot-

tom. It was a long time before their efforts had much perceptible result; but the big raft slowly gathered some speed, and at last attained a rate of something like a mile an hour.

It was a nervous period. It seemed impossible to work the speed any higher. The usual river mist had risen, making the woods and the water gray and indistinct. The boys sat on the bee-hives, hot, damp, alert, watching the trees crawl slowly past through the dim fog. It seemed to them that hours went by before a wider space showed dimly in front, and the head of the raft veered under a new current.

"The river at last!" muttered Joe, with immense relief.

They were really emerging into the Alabama. The boys fended off from the shore, fearful of sticking on the sand-bar as the raft slowly poked its nose out into the big river. Through the fog they could see little, but they could hear the rush and surge of the deep waters, running high with the heavy rain. They were fairly under way at last, and the anxiety began to fall from their minds.

But before the raft was entirely out of the

bayou Bob suddenly gripped his cousin hard by the arm. Joe had heard it too, and so had Sam—the rattle and splash of oars up the stream. A boat was coming; it was invisible in the fog, but a few seconds later they heard a loud, reckless voice that they all recognized.

"Blue Bob! Oh, lordy! Now we's sure 'nuff cotched!" Sam groaned.

"Hush!" Joe whispered, with a savage glance.

The boys crouched on the raft, scarcely daring to breathe, for their slowly-moving craft still blocked the mouth of the bayou. But fortunately the pirates' boat was not so near as they imagined. Sound carries clear and far through fog, and the gray mist lay like a blanket on the water. The boys could not see from one end of the raft to the other; and they did not know for certain whether they were actually out until the raft began to show a brisker activity and to swing ponderously round in the Alabama current.

"What 's that?" said a voice that sounded. scarce twenty feet distant. "I see somethin' movin' yander."

The oars stopped. A faint blur showed

through the fog. Joe noiselessly cocked his little rifle.

"Timber raft!" Blue Bob declared. "Blackburn's gang has been raftin' logs all the week down ter Mobile. I kin see it right plain.

"Well, that's what you reckon. I want to go an' make shore," returned another voice.

"Aw, shucks!" retorted the chief. "Nothin' but a gang of river niggers aboard. We 've got too heavy a load here to row back against this current."

The stroke of the oars began again. The boat seemed to pass within a stone's toss of the end of the raft, and the sound of rowing grew fainter up the bayou.

"Safe!" Bob ventured to whisper, after silence had fallen.

"I reckon so," Joe murmured. "My hair almost turned gray for a minute. Luckily we put out those fires."

"Yes-suh, Mr. Joe," said Sam hoarsely. "But don't you reckon dey 'll see right quick that we 've done took de rosin an' busted de cabin an' moved de bees—an' dey 'll be right after us?"

"They can't see anything to-night," returned

Joe. "Likely they 'll sleep late to-morrow, and by noon we ought to be nearly at the end of our journey."

"Besides, they 'll think we 've gone by the steamboat," said Bob, "and no use chasing us. They 'll never dream of a raft. I don't believe they 'll give us any more trouble at all."

They all tried to adopt this optimistic view. The raft was well out in the big river now, drifting at fair speed but proving quite unsteerable. The water was too deep to reach the bottom with the poles, and it was impossible to see anything ahead through the haze, so the boys were compelled to sit still upon the bee-hives, letting the raft drift, and trusting to blind luck to keep clear of sand-bars.

But the night was drawing to an end. Presently the fog paled and then reddened over in the east, and began to disperse. As the sun came up the drifting clouds split and melted; the boys saw themselves at last in the wide, yellow river, nearly in mid-channel, with low banks of intensely green swamp on both sides. The river was several hundred yards wide at this point, running fast with great surging eddies.

They were delighted to see how well the raft that they had built carried the weight of the hives. The flooring was dry; the hives stood a good four inches above the water. The framework seemed to hold together rigidly and strongly. Hardly a bee was in sight, though all the entrances were wide open. They had all crept inside, discomforted by the damp and by the steady swaying motion.

"How about breakfast?" Joe suggested.

"Just the thing," said Bob. "I brought some of the stolen grub from the cabin. But we 'll have to eat raw ham, I guess, for we can't build a fire here."

"Why not?" Joe laughed, and he got into the small boat, rowed himself ashore, and overtook the raft with a bushel of sand and gravel and mud. With these materials they made a fireplace on the planking of the raft and ventured to kindle enough of a blaze to boil coffee and fry ham, putting it out immediately afterward, though Joe said that the timber rafts carry fires burning continually on a mud bed.

The food did them a great deal of good, and they began to feel much more cheerful. The sun

shone brilliantly over the river, promising another hot day. The bees, warmed up, began to stir uneasily, crawling out, taking wing, and then returning, confused by the strangeness of the locality.

"I do believe they 're going to try to gather honey while they travel," exclaimed Joe. "If they do, they 'll never get back to the raft again."

But the intelligent insects were far too knowing to be thus caught. They flew about within a few yards of the hives, evidently looking the situation over. Then, deciding that conditions were far too mysterious and uncertain for work, they settled about the hive entrances in clusters and flew no more.

All through that forenoon the boys kept a watchful eye on the river behind them, continually in dread of seeing Blue Bob's pursuing boat dart around a bend. But their apprehensions gradually diminished as time passed. The raft was making quite creditable speed now, for the current was unusually strong since the rain. The river wound and doubled on itself through the trees, always curving, always bordered by the dense swamps, gray with drooping Spanish moss.

Twice they passed a solitary and deserted river-side warehouse—stopping-places for the boat. Once in a long time there was a patch of "bottom-land corn," growing rankly in the rich mud; but the only human being they saw was a negro fisherman in a canoe. He was so stupified by the sight of the big raft of bee-hives that he was incapable of even answering the boys' hail.

The boys lounged back on their blankets and let the raft drift. Sam went soundly asleep on his back in the sun. It was pleasant to rest, for they had been under a great physical strain for days and had been cutting the nights short at both ends. But now they began to feel well on the way to safety, and they let the warm sun take the ache out of their sore muscles.

"The worst is over now," said Bob. "We ought to be able to land the bees to-night. No fear of pursuit now, I guess. In a month from now we 'll have a car-load of bees up in Ontario, at Harman's Corners, and we 'll all be independent for the rest of our lives."

"You bet we will!" Joe responded with enthusiasm. "I 'm going to learn the bee business for

all I 'm worth. With the money from the rosin and everything we ought to be on velvet, and I don't see how we can possibly lose on the thing now."

It was clear, however, that it would be late that evening before they could reach the spot where Joe counted on unloading the bees, whence they could be hauled across country to the railway. The river continued to unroll its endless, solitary windings. Wild ducks whirred up occasionally; once two small alligators flopped off the sand-bar into the water. Bob tried a little fishing but caught nothing. Sam was asleep again, and the two white boys finally lapsed into a doze.

They were sharply awakened by the raft touching on a hidden sand-bar, half grounding, and them swinging off, end for end. Startled by the jar, the bees were roaring and crawling out. The boys, scarcely less startled, sprang to the poles to push off, but the danger was already over, and the raft was under way again.

"That won't do!" exclaimed Joe. "We must keep better watch than that. The river 's falling

now; it may be a foot lower by morning, and if we 'd got hung on that bar we might never have got off."

For the rest of that afternoon they slept no more, but kept on the lookout for dangerous shallows. The raft did not ground again, but once it went over a submerged snag with a grinding jar that set all the bees rushing out. The collision might have ripped the bottom out of a boat, but the raft was unsinkable.

The sun went down over the swamps, and Sam lighted the fire again on the bed of sand and prepared supper. Mosquitoes began to be bad; a cool dampness, full of the smell of rotting vegetation, rose from the water. But it did not look as if there was going to be any fog that night, and they were determined to keep on as long as they could see. It could not be many miles, Joe thought, to their destination.

So they kept on through the twilight. It was almost dark when the raft went round a bend, and, carried by the shoot of the cross-current, went straight for the other shore, where a long peninsula extended, piled with a rick of dead drift-timber.

"Steer her! Fend off!" Joe shouted, but the momentum was too great. Nor would the poles touch bottom, and the raft ran heavily into something, recoiled, and swung sideways into the mass of fallen trees. There was a tremendous rending and crashing, and for a moment the heavy craft seemed likely to sweep the obstruction away. Then it slackened, the snapping of twigs ceased. The raft stood motionless, with the river current surging under its timbers. There was a great roaring from the troubled bees.

"Hung up for sure!" said Bob, peering through the twilight at the tangle of dead branches. "We 'll have to chop and saw all that stuff clear. It 'll be an all-night job."

They were close to the shore, and mosquitoes began to swarm out in vicious hordes. Slapping at the pests, the boys in perplexity tried to examine the trap they were in by the light of splinters of blazing pine.

"I vote we go ashore somewhere and camp," Joe suggested. "We can't do this job in the dark. The mosquitoes 'll eat us alive if we stay here all night, and we might get a dose of chills and

fever besides. Let 's go back to high ground."

"Think it 's safe?" Bob asked, doubtfully.

"Of course. The raft can't get loose, and nobody is going to touch it. We must be far out of Blue Bob's range now. We 'd have seen him before if he 'd been after us."

The others were willing to be persuaded, and they put the blankets and guns into the boat and went ashore. It was hard to find a spot dry enough to land. They got involved in a swamp, groped through fifty yards of mud and jungle, and came at last to rising "hammock-land." A hundred yards further the ground was still higher, and a bare, open space seemed to promise comparative freedom from mosquitoes. It was so warm that they needed no fire; they spread their blankets on the bare ground and went promptly asleep.

Nothing disturbed them during the night, and they slept late, making up for their lately broken rests. The sun was well up when they awoke, and the night fog was thinning on the river. They were chilly and wet with dew as they tramped stiffly down to the shore, found their boat, and started to row down to the raft.

There was still a drifting haze on the water. It was impossible to see clearly to the opposite bank, but the long point at the river bend, the rick of dead driftwood, was plain enough. But—

They let the boat drift, staring incredulously.

"Oh, Joe!" cried Bob in a heart-broken voice.

The tangle of drift had been pried and cut apart. The raft was no longer there.

CHAPTER XVII

WAR ON THE RIVER

"IT can't possibly be gone!" exclaimed Joe, desperately. "How could it have got loose?"

Bob pointed to the dead timber, which showed the fresh marks of ax and saw.

"It 's been cut in the night," he said bitterly. "We were fools to leave it here. And if we had n't slept so heavily we 'd have heard the noise of chopping. Of course it 's the river-men who did this."

"Yes," Joe admitted, "and I surely thought we 'd thrown them off the trail. But they must have been following us down all the time, likely waiting back around the last river bend all last evening. Oh, it 's Blue Bob's work, all right. Who else 'd have been out on the river in the dark and fog? And nobody else in Alabama would have run off with that raft of bees. He 's

trying to get back at us for the rosin. But we 'll get him yet."

"The raft 's gone down stream, Joe," said Bob, after a silence. "No power in Alabama could have hauled it a foot the other way, and it 's too big to hide. Those fellows can't be very many miles down the river with it."

"We 'll overtake them; of course we will!" returned Joe, grimly. "Good thing we carried our guns ashore last night. How many cartridges have you?"

Their supply was short. Bob had nothing but the seven rounds in the magazine of his repeater. Joe had twelve shots in his magazine and a handful of loose cartridges in his pocket. Unfortunately Bob's rifle was of a different caliber and would not take them.

"It 's enough, anyway," said Bob. "I hope we don't fire even all these. We 'll play those fellows at their own game—trail them, run them down, catch them unawares. I only wish we 'd brought some grub ashore with us."

"I kin soon shoot a rabbit or ketch a few catfish." Sam suggested.

"No time for that now," said Joe. "I think

we ought to catch up with the raft within two or three hours if we start right off."

Charged with grim determination they started down the river. By the time they had reached the first great curve the fog had lifted, and they crept cautiously around the bend. Nothing was in sight on the new reach ahead. Indeed they had expected nothing so soon, and they raced down a mile of channel, edged warily around the bend, and still found the river empty.

They began to feel faint from hunger, and while the white boys rowed they set Sam to troll a line over the stern for catfish. But he had no luck; he caught nothing. Another river reach still showed no trace of the raft. Opening into the river at frequent intervals were cross-channels, bayous, backwaters and creeks, screened with willow, curtained with bamboo-vine, misty with gray Spanish moss, but the boys kept to the main channel. Seven or eight miles went by. They rounded bend after bend, but sighted no larger living thing than a flock of wild ducks.

"I don't see how she could have got very much farther than this," said Bob, as he mopped his

perspiring face. "Do you think those thieves could have burned her or cut her to pieces?"

"We 'd surely have seen some floating wreckage. "And burning would have left an awful smell of scorched wax and bees. No, I 've been thinking that perhaps those fellows did n't steal the raft at all—did n't stay on it, I mean. They 'd have been afraid of the bees, for one thing. I 'll bet they would n't have stayed an hour on board for anything. I believe they may have simply taken all the loose articles they could lift, and then turned the raft loose to spite us, and probably she 's drifting down somewhere all by herself."

"Dey 'd shorely want all dat honey in de hives," put in Sam. "It 's worf a heap of money."

"We did n't leave much honey. The wax is worth a good deal; that's a fact. But I don't believe they 'd want to handle it," said Joe.

Around the next curve they went. Another mile of empty, sunny, water lay before them; and so it was with the next and the next sweep of the river. Then they espied a curl of smoke on the shore. It proved to be the fire of a negro fish-

erman, who said that he had been on the river all night in his boat, and that no raft had gone past. He was then breakfasting on corn-bread and fried catfish, and he willingly fried more fish for the party and gave them all the bread he could spare. The food made them feel vastly more hopeful, and at last they had something definite to direct them. Giving the negro half a dollar, they turned up-stream again.

"You must be wrong, Joe," said Bob. "The pirates have got it after all and have hidden it somewhere. Otherwise we 'd have sighted it."

"Looks that way," Joe admitted. "Still, I can't believe they 're riding with the bees. They 'd be scared to death. They must have poled it into one of these backwaters."

"We know it 's somewhere between here and last night's camp, anyhow. I 'll search every inch of the shore till I find it." Bob declared.

Up the river they rowed till the first of the bayou-mouths appeared, like a swampy bay. The boys put their rifles handy, and, dipping the oars without a sound, they pushed into it. But half a dozen strokes showed that the raft could never have come that way, for the channel was silted up

and almost choked with dead and rotting timber.

They retreated and started up the river again, crossing to the other side, where something looked like a backwater but proved to be only a willowy cove. A little farther they came unexpectedly upon a creek-mouth, so screened with swamp shrubs that it was invisible at a few yards' distance. But it led merely into a flooded shallow flat, swarming with mosquitoes and venomous yellow-flies.

"Reminds me of the time we searched the River Island for the houseboat," said Joe.

Slowly they made their way up stream, leaving not a yard of either shore unobserved. The sun was high now, and both the boys were growing weary, but it was absolutely certain that every stroke was bringing them nearer to the stolen bees.

"I 'd never dare to face Alice again and say the bees were lost," said Joe suddenly.

"If Blue Bob has destroyed them," returned his cousin, "we 'll get a sheriff's posse and spend the rest of the summer hunting those thieves through the swamps till we get them."

Another shallow, rotting backwater proved

blank. They zigzagged across the river again and were skirting up close to the shore when Joe suddenly stopped rowing, with a startled exclamation. Leaning over, he picked up something from the water, and held it up for Bob to see. It was a piece of broken honeycomb, about as large as his hand.

The eyes of the two boys met with the same look of comprehension. They had struck the trail, and Sam voiced the thought in both their minds:

"Golly! Blue Bob is shore gittin' after dat honey. Jes' what I done said."

Plainly, indeed, something was breaking up the beehives. Trying to combine speed and silence, they rowed up the shore, on the lookout for some opening. Again they saw a fragment of comb, lodged against a projecting root; but it was fully a quarter of a mile before they came to a break in the shore, heavily screened by vines and shrubs and drooping live-oak branches. They had passed right by it on the way down. Masses of rattan and wild honeysuckle trailed almost to the water, but Joe at once saw signs that something had lately crushed through that green curtain.

They shoved the boat noiselessly up to the entrance, and Joe thrust his head through the green tangle. Almost instantly he drew it back, and his eyes gleamed with excitement.

"The raft—" he whispered; but he was interrupted by a sound of subdued voices and a burst of laughter, apparently not a hundred feet through the trees.

"It 's there, all right!" he muttered excitedly. "Just inside. I could almost touch it. The gang 's further on. We can't go in here. We 've got to land and go around."

"I smells beeswax. I smells smoke, Mr. Joe!" whispered Sam, sniffing the air. "What you reckon dem fellows doin'?"

"Don't know. I could n't see them," returned Joe. "Back out of here. Let her float down a little."

They dropped down the current for fifty feet, then ran the boat ashore in the mud, and crept inland through the palmetto and fern, heading for the voices that came through the thickets. As they went on the ground grew drier, densely grown up with small gum- and bay-trees; and they crawled the last twenty feet through a jungle of

sharp-edged palmetto, and came in sight of the stolen raft.

There it lay, the raft they had worked upon so hard. It was apparently intact, and the close rows of beehives still stood upon it, with the honey-extractor, the box of tools, and the camp-kit. There was a great roaring of bees in the air, and immediately the white boys as well as Sam smelt both smoke and beeswax.

The raft was moored by a rope to a great splintered pine-stump. There was a strong current running in that bayou; the rope was stretched taut, and the raft swung and swayed slightly on the water. The rowboat of the robbers was drawn up on the shore, and, as Joe took in the scene, he espied with astonishment the houseboat—the identical black houseboat that he had boarded before, snugly stowed and moored in the creek a few yards farther up. Evidently this nook was one of the regular resorts of the river-men.

He nudged his cousin and pointed it out. But they had little attention to spare for the boat. What was going on beside the water was of much more interest at the moment.

The pirates were hardly ten yards away, laughing and talking, hard at work. Their guns all lay together in their rowboat. Evidently they anticipated no interruption, and they seemed in great spirits. Three or four dismantled beehives lay about the shore, but for a few minutes the boys could not grasp what the thieves were about.

Then Candler and the third man stepped aboard the raft and gingerly picked up a hive. Blue Bob from the shore jeered at them for their caution. They dropped it quickly into the water, held it under with a pole for a minute or two, then drew it ashore. Pulling cover, super and bottom apart, they knocked out the wet mass of half-drowned bees, shook out the combs, and proceeded to cut out the wax.

Bob gave a convulsive gasp as he realized the destruction that was going on.

"They 're killing them! They 're breaking them up!" he exclaimed incautiously; but Joe's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

The pirates had heard nothing. At a little distance stood the big iron kettle that had been used for rosin, and as they cut out the combs they tossed them into it. A small fire burned around

its edges, melting the wax. Where there was any honey in the combs they cut it out and laid it aside, but the Harmans had not left much honey from the last extracting.

"We 've done bust up four of these here gums," they heard Candler say grumblingly, "an' we ain't got as much honey as I 've seen cut outer one bee-tree. This ain't goin' ter pay us for the rosin them young Yankees stole."

"I dunno," said Blue Bob. "You never seen so much wax in your born days as we 've got here. There 's mebbe three hundred dollars' worth, when we git it all melted up. An' then ain't we got back our own stuff from Old Dick's cabin that them Yankees stole too?"

This charge of stealing might have seemed more comical if the case had not been so desperate. But it was maddening to lie there in the palmetto and watch their precious apiary being destroyed. Four colonies had already been drowned and cut up, and the outlaws were now heaving a fifth into the water. A cloud of frightened and angry bees seethed up as the hive went under. Bob was amazed that the fellows

had the courage to handle the bees so freely. They had not come off unscathed; their chief had a large swelling on the blue streak across his forehead, and Candler complained that his hand was getting stiff with "pizen," but they seemed to be taking the whole thing as sport and went ahead in high spirits. But it was no sport for the owners of the bees.

"I can't stand watching this!" Joe whispered. "Let 's give 'em a volley. We could wipe out the whole bunch."

Bob looked over the scene of the wrecking doubtfully. Bees were flying in clouds, from the hives on the raft as well as from the broken-up hives. It is hard to drown a bee. The wet mass of stupefied insects on the ground was crawling, buzzing, drying off.

"Hold on a bit," he whispered back. "There'll be trouble in a minute. They won't cut up many more hives."

In fact, the bees were flying every moment more thickly. The cut-out lumps of honey were covered with plundering yellow bodies. Bees were darting from the hives on the raft, flying in

circles, returning in excitement, smelling the spilt honey. The whole raft was beginning to stir and roar.

"These bees is comin' round too thick." Blue Bob remarked. He had been about to step on the raft for another hive for destruction, but he recoiled before the cloud of irritated insects. He made a jump aside and swore, slapping his neck, then retreated with some haste. Candler ventured forward, then drew back.

"We 've done got 'em all roused up," he said. "Let 's wait till they quiet down some."

Bob grinned as he heard this. Quiet down! The disturbance would get worse every minute. The bees were suspicious, irritable from the continual jar and movement of the last two days; they had gathered no honey; and now they found sweet spilled on the ground and the air reeking with the smell of honey and wax. It completed their demoralization. Not quite sure where the honey was, they were already sniffing at one another's hives, trying to force an entrance, trying to rob. Little yellow knots of fighting bees rolled on the planking, trying desperately to sting one another.

"The whole outfit 's going to go wild in a few minutes," Bob muttered in Joe's ear. "There's going to be a robbing riot."

Joe did not have experience enough to appreciate the force of this. Few things are more downright terrifying than one of these wars in a large bee-yard, when the whole apiary runs amuck. Every colony is at once robbing and endeavoring to rob; every one is fighting every other, and the bees grow so infuriated that they will attack everything within their range, will fly into fire, will sting even the wood of the hives. Men and animals have been killed by being caught in such an affray. Such disturbances seldom happen, and never under good management; but here everything was set exactly right for the worst sort of outbreak.

The river pirates had each been stung several times, and had ceased to laugh. They had retreated up toward their houseboat; they had lighted pipes, and were trying to keep the bees off with great clouds of smoke, waiting vainly for the insects to grow quieter. A swirl of darting bees hung over the raft; the pile of cut-out combs

ashore was completely hidden by the crawling, fighting insects.

"How 'll this end?" Joe whispered to Bob. "Looks as if they 'd eat each other up."

"So they will. Nothing but night 'll stop it now, and by that time half the outfit 'll be dead," returned Bob anxiously.

Joe scrutinized the scene carefully once more.

"I believe I can cut that raft loose," he said. "There 's current to drift it right out into the river."

The stump to which the raft was tied was on this side of the bayou. The pirates were on the other side, and had retreated a hundred feet to get away from the bees. More important still, their guns appeared to be all in their rowboat, at a still greater distance. Perhaps they carried revolvers. He would have to risk that.

"Golly! Them bees 'll shore sting you to death if you goes out yander, Mr. Joe!" Sam muttered aghast; but Joe began to worm himself forward through the flat, rustling leaves of the palmetto.

The mooring stump was not more than fifty feet away, and he kept close down under the thick cover. The attention of the enemy was entirely

taken up with the bees just then, and the bees themselves did not notice him until he came close to the end of the raft. Then he was suddenly stung on the hand, and again on the back of the neck; two or three insects zipped like small bullets against his hat; but he heroically refrained from even squirming.

He reached the stump, which grew out of a tangle of small shrubbery, and he lay low behind this screen while he felt for his knife. The mooring rope was just above his head, obviously bearing a heavy strain. A sharp blade would part it almost at a touch, but Joe could not find his knife. He searched all his pockets. It was not there. His heart sank like lead as he realized that he must either have lost it or left it on the raft.

He hated to crawl back; he was doubtful of being able to get back unobserved. Crouching there, he looked up longingly at the rope almost above his head. He could hardly untie the knot; he would be shot down long before he could loosen it; but he noticed all at once that the pine stub was "fat." Purple splinters, crystalline with rosin, hung from it. They would burn like

candles. He felt for a match, struck it, reached up, and set the lowest splinter ablaze.

He had to rise half upright to do it, and he expected to be challenged, to be fired at. But the pirates were so much occupied with the bees that they failed to notice his momentary rising and dropping again. The resinous splinters flared, hissing and smoking; fire shot up over the old stump as if it were soaked in kerosene. Then there was a sudden shout from Blue Bob.

"Look yander! That thar stump 's afire!"

He started forward, and then struck back, awed by the furious cloud of flying bees. That hesitation lost his chance. The rope was already smoldering. The loop parted, smoking. The slack dropped into the water, and with a jerk the big raft began to drift.

Joe was squirming back as fast as possible toward his friends, too fast for caution, for he heard one of the river-men shout in a startled voice:

"What 's that movin' yander?" and then a roar of wrath from the captain and a tremendous oath.

"Look out! That raft 's broke loose."

Reckless of the bees, all three men plunged for-

ward to secure it; but with a startling unexpectedness Bob's rifle banged twice from his ambush. Mud spurted into the air, kicked up by the bullets striking at the robbers' feet, and then Bob jumped up with rifle ready to fire again.

"Stand where you are!" he cried. "Next time I 'll shoot to hit somebody."

"That 's the stuff! Hold 'em there!" Joe yelled, and he jumped up and ran to secure his own rifle where he had left it.

The river pirates had stopped in dead astonishment, facing the two leveled weapons across the bayou. Between the antagonists the raft went drifting ponderously out, surrounded by a roar and swirl of angry bees. Bees zipped into the boys' faces, but they were too strung up just then to notice an odd sting. The pirates, closer to the raft, were more hotly attacked. Candler flapped in the air with his felt hat and then made a dive backward.

"Stop it!" Joe yelled. "Stand perfectly still or we 'll shoot."

Candler stopped. The raft was going out with maddening slowness. It scarcely seemed to move, and the boys were terribly afraid that it

would go aground before it cleared the creek-mouth. Once it did seem to touch bottom, but it slid free, and began to smash through the screen of willows and clinging vines. Its speed increased. The extreme end was catching the river current.

"Soon as it 's out we 'll bolt for our boat," said Joe, in a low voice. But Blue Bob had forseen the finish.

"Don't you see that it 's getting away, an' all our stuff on it?" he shrieked. "Jump fer the guns, I say. Them kids won't dare shoot."

He was not afraid to do what he ordered, and he bolted for the rowboat where the guns lay, almost as he uttered the last word. Joe yelled warningly; both the boys fired without effect. Through the smoke Joe saw the three outlaws tumbling to pick up their weapons.

"Run!" Bob ejaculated.

Sam had already disappeared. The two boys dived back into the undergrowth and, crouching low, bolted for the river. A burst of firing broke out behind them. Bullets ripped the bay-leaves and whacked into the cypress-trunks; but they got

to the shore without being touched. Sam had set the boat afloat and was holding it ready, wide-eyed with alarm and almost pale through his black.

"Shore to goodness, I thought you-all was killed!" he exclaimed, and they sent the boat flying out into the river.

As they cleared the shore they saw the end of the raft emerging majestically from the inlet. It was followed by a cloud of flying bees. It looked as if every hive on the raft was sending out a swarm.

"Can't go aboard there!" gasped Bob. "We 'd be killed. Across the river—quick. They won't dare touch the raft either."

They doubled over the oars, passing the raft as it came completely out of the creek and turned down the Alabama current. They drove the boat hard for the shelter of the other shore, but they were no more than half-way across when they heard a wild whoop and saw the pirates' boat shoot out in pursuit.

Bob had a despairing feeling that all was lost. The glitter of the sun on the water dazzled him; the strain of the fight and the hard rowing left

him dizzy. Still he pulled automatically till he heard Joe say:

"Slow up. They 're not after us."

With a gasp of relief Bob rested on his oars, wiped the sweat out of his half-blinded eyes, and took in the situation. They had nearly reached the farther shore. The river-men were still keeping to their own side of the stream, following the raft down, but keeping well back from it. For the floating apiary presented a formidable spectacle, which even an experienced bee-keeper would rather have contemplated from a distance.

The pine hives were black with crawling bees, robbers trying to get in, and the hive-guards themselves. Overhead a roaring cloud swirled and drifted. It was plain that the raft needed no defenders now.

"I would n't go aboard it for a bank safe," said Bob, "not even with a veil and smoker. But what are those fellows following it up for, do you suppose?"

"Don't forget that the boxes full of plunder are there still," replied Joe. "The jewelry and jack-knives and revolvers that we took out of the cabin. I expect they want to get them. Maybe they 're

still hoping that the bees will quiet down, too."

The boys let the boat drift, holding it back to keep pace with the slow raft. So did the outlaws on the opposite side of the water, and for some time the two boats drifted slowly, watching each other across the river, but firing no shots, while the tumultuous raft roared and fought between them.

"What are they doing? They 're fixing something," Bob exclaimed at last.

"Fixin' to make a smudge, I reckon," said Sam. who had keen eyes.

Two of the men had put their heads together over something, and a dense smoke suddenly arose. The boat turned toward the raft, rowed slowly and cautiously, and as it approached the men could be seen to turn up their collars and pull their hats down over their faces. Muffled to the eyes, Blue Bob stood up in the bow, holding a tin pan full of some burning substance that smoked heavily.

"He 's certainly got nerve," Joe commented. "But he can't stop that riot with a pan of smoke."

Holding the pan before him, Blue Bob leaped on the raft. The bees drifted momentarily away

from the smoke-cloud, but it was not enough to subdue them, and the outlaw seemed to move in a mist of flying insects. He kept his head, however, made his way to the box of plunder, and handed it down into the boat. He had to set the smoke-pan down to do it, and he must have been fearfully punished, but he stuck gamely to the task and passed out the second box. His companions in the boat were less courageous; they squirmed and swore and beat at the bees around their heads.

Determined to get all he could, the outlaw reached for the boys' box of tools and amunition; and in doing so he contrived to knock off the cover of the nearest hive. A fresh cloud of doubly maddened bees boiled up. It was more than the boat's crew could stand. Frantically fighting bees, they pushed off, and backed away twenty feet.

"He 'll be stung to death!" Joe ejaculated.

With savage oaths Blue Bob commanded the deserters to come back for him; but they refused to face the bees again. They yelled to him to jump and swim. He caught the smoke-pan. It had gone out. He flung it down and brushed and

beat frantically at his face. The boat drifted farther away, its crew still calling on their chief to jump.

"He 'll be killed if he does n't jump!" Joe exclaimed; and at that moment his ears caught a distant, approaching "thud-thud," sounding up the river. But he did not guess what it was; he did not look that way, absorbed by the drama in mid-river, till Sam uttered a wild yell:

"Look yander, what 's a-comin', Mr. Joe. Whoop-ee! Oh, glory!"

A boat was coming around the next bend above, a motor-launch, going fast, and apparently full of men. With a cry of joy, Joe fired his rifle in the air. A shot answered it from the boat, and somebody waved a speck of white among the crew.

"It 's help! It 's friends!" Joe exclaimed. "Carl 's been in time."

In the uproar of the bees Blue Bob must have heard nothing. But his comrades in the boat saw and heard the launch immediately. There was a momentary staring and consultation; then Candler stood up in the boat and fired two shots into the nearest beehives, and a third bullet at

the boys' boat. It clipped the water and glanced humming away, and the pirates rowed breakneck for shore, ran the boat heavily aground, and plunged into the swamp.

Blue Bob seemed to see the motor-boat then for the first time. He shouted once after his companions, glanced again up the river, and then started for the forward end of the raft, almost obscured by the flying bees. He turned round half-blindly, and seemed to totter.

"He 's badly stung. He 'll go overboard!" Joe exclaimed.

"We must take him off. Maybe he can't swim," his cousin agreed, and they rowed hard toward the raft. But they had not covered half the distance when the pirate either fell or leaped into the river, and the yellow water closed over him. The boys drove the boat up to the outside of the circle of bees, and hung on their oars, waiting for him to come up. A minute or two passed. The raft floated slowly on.

"I believe he went right under the raft," Bob muttered.

Finally a battered felt hat drifted out behind the logs, but nothing more. The boys circled

the raft, but there was no sign of the river pirate.

"Gone to the bottom!" said Joe; and the boys were still rowing about, rather horror-stricken at their enemy's sudden end, when the motor-boat rushed up.

"Too late for the fight?" shouted the young fellow at the wheel, whom they recognized as having been at Magnolia Landing. Carl was just behind him; among the others Bob caught sight of the face of Uncle Louis, and there were three other armed men in the boat.

"Yes, the fighting 's over. Did you come too, Uncle Louis?" cried Joe. "Why, Alice! What are you doing here?"

Alice, flushed with excitement, was in the stern beside Uncle Louis, and she was half laughing, and almost crying.

"Oh, boys!" she gasped. Are you both all right? Of course you knew I 'd come. What 's the matter with the bees?"

"I got this motor-boat and a posse as soon as I could," said Carl. "We went down to Old Dick's place and found you 'd gone, and the cabin was all torn down. Did n't know what to do; finally guessed you must have gone down the

river somewhere. We heard the shooting away back, and put on steam. But say, what 's the matter with the apiary? Robbing?"

"Rather!" said Bob. "We 've got to stop it. That pirate gang got away into the woods. Any use going after them? And old Blue Bob's drowned. Went under the raft and never came up."

"Well, that 's mighty good riddance," said Uncle Louis. That man 's been a plague all long the river. Not much use trying to catch the others. We 'd never find them in the swamps. We 'll smash their boat, and maybe they won't trouble these parts any more."

"Don't smash that boat," said Bob. "Let me make a smoke-boat of it. We 've got to subdue those bees right away, or they 'll rob one another all to pieces."

On this ingenious suggestion they filled the outlaws' boat with leaves and damp wood, and set it on fire. It produced an immense volume of choking smoke, and, towing it to the windward side of the raft, they fastened it alongside.

Under that choking smother the war in the air suddenly stopped. The bees made in a panic for

their own hives, and in a few minutes Bob was able to board the raft. Securing a bee-veil, gloves, and a smoker, he went up and down the rows, puffing smoke into all the entrances, and drenching the hives with water.

"That 'll keep 'em quiet for the rest of the day, I think," he said. "And we ought to have 'em ashore by to-night."

They had, in fact, gone below the point on the river where they had intended to unload the cargo. Two miles still farther down, however, there was a steamboat landing, a small settlement, and a road that led out to the railway, five miles to the west. There was scarcely any danger of a fresh attack by the discomfited pirates, but the motor-boat stayed with them as they floated down to this point. It was well that it did so, for it took the united efforts of the six men to bring the big raft to a halt and moor it at the landing.

When it grew dark they carried the hives ashore. The bees were quiet enough now, but the raft was littered with pints of dead from the fighting.

"Got 'em somewhere at last!" said Bob, con-

templating the rows of hives on the river-bank. "It did begin to look as if we never would."

"They 've got a thousand miles yet to go," Alice reminded him. "This move has only begun."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HARVEST

AFTER the strenuous events of the last week the boys felt that they needed a rest, and they did nothing for two days. Carl had delivered the barge-load of rosin at Harper's landing; and Harper had agreed to send a check to Joe as soon as the stuff could be remelted and weighed up. In the meantime, Uncle Louis volunteered to finance them a little; and he arranged for a credit at the bank at Shomo, where they were going to take the railroad.

He went over to Shomo himself with Bob and Joe to take the train, and Joe arranged for two large motor-trucks to handle the bees. At the same time he secured a cabin with a large lot just outside of the village for the temporary site of the apiary; and engaged board for the whole party at the local hotel.

The bees made three truck-loads, and Bob thoughtfully suggested that they break up the raft and take a load of the best of the lumber—an idea that turned out very valuable. For the apiary was entering upon a new stage now, in which each colony had to be turned into three, and there was a demand for new hives and lumber at every moment.

It was a race against time now, for it was already nearly the end of April, and unless the bees could be delivered in Canada by the last of May they would be of little use for the clover-bloom. Alice immediately started a vast number of queen-cells to be used for the new colonies, and as soon as these were well under way she split each colony in two by taking off the top story with its combs and bees to make a separate hive, dividing the forces as equally as possible.

To their great relief, Harper's check arrived at this time, for the amount of $4200. Half of this indeed technically belonged to Mr. Burnam, but Uncle Louis had promised to arrange the matter so that the boys should have the use of it until Burnam's debt was paid off. Joe immediately presented Sam with fifty silver dollars,

a greater sum than the negro had ever seen before at one time.

"Dis yere bee-keepin' is shorely one fine stunt!" Sam gasped, regardless that the bees had not had much to do with the acquisition of that money.

Bob immediately made a flying trip to Mobile, ordering a hundred new factory-made hives, a thousand more frames, and a hundred pounds of foundation, and bringing back with him fifty Italian queens, with another fifty to follow by mail.

All this made money vanish. The check for the shipment of honey arrived a week later, but it was for only $320 after all, and it was evident that, but for Joe's investment, the enterprise never could have been put through.

"I wish you were n't in it so heavily, Joe," said Alice, as they were working together at the queen-rearing operations. "It makes me worried for fear you 'll lose. It 's all right for us to take risks; bees are our trade."

"It 's going to be my trade too," Joe responded cheerfully. "But we 're not going to lose. Besides," he added mysteriously, "I could n't lose; it 's been worth it all just to have had—to have

been—well, you know, just to have been through all this with you."

Alice flushed a little under her bee-veil, opened another hive, and blew in smoke.

"We 've had great luck," she said. "I hope it lasts."

It did last. There was no great nor heavy honey flow at Shomo, no forests of honey-trees, but a steady, unbroken light gathering of honey that caused the new colonies to build up marvelously. The new queens hatched and flew and began to lay. Once more the Harmans marveled at the rapidity of development of the bees in this Southern spring, untroubled by cold nights or sudden, sharp breaks in the honey flow as are usual in the North. By the middle of May all the fresh colonies were up to more than half the strength of a normal colony—quite strong enough for shipment; and after much anxious thought Bob gave orders for the freight-car to be left on the siding on the eighteenth.

The die was cast now, and everything had to be thought out in the minutest detail. Hastily they tacked screens of wire-gauze over the tops and bottoms of the hives; they cut out lumber and

scantling for braces and crating in the car; they prepared barrels for water—for bees in transit must be sprayed frequently to keep them cool. Carl had volunteered to ride with the outfit, and he had to carry his own supply of food and drink, for, once in the car, he might not be able to leave it till he reached his destination.

The loading of the car occupied all day and half of the night, and drew a continuous, curious, and amused crowd of the village folk, whose universal opinion was that the "young Yankees" were insane to think of shipping bee-gums away up North by freight. The last hive was finally stowed and braced into place, and Carl went aboard with a big box of provisions, his barrels of water, a spray pump, a pair of blankets, and the prospect of a rough journey. The engine was already waiting; the car was coupled up to the train and the string of freight-cars rattled out, with Carl leaning out of the door and waving as long as he was in sight.

The rest of the party had already made their preparations, and were to leave by the passenger-train that night. Joe presented Sam with another hundred dollars—all that he dared spare,

but with the promise of more in the autumn if things went well.

"Thankee, Mr. Joe!" Sam exclaimed in great delight. "Dunno what I 'll do with all dis money, nohow. I 'm a-goin' hunt up more gums while you-all is away. Reckon I kin fin' lots an' lots ef I looks fer 'em. Dis yere woods-ridin', bee-keepin', rosin-stealin' bizness is jes' what suits me. You come back soon too, Miss Alice. I 'll be a-waitin' fer you."

It was with genuine regret that they bade good-by to their faithful black retainer, and boarded the train that night for the North. Three whole days were consumed in the journey; they must have passed Carl with the bees somewhere en route, but they did not see him; and they arrived in Ontario and at Harman's Corners at last in a spell of chilly May weather that to Joe seemed appallingly like winter.

It was the first time he had ever been north of Tennessee, and all things were even more novel and surprising to him than Alabama had seemed to his cousins. The great, smooth, fertile farms, almost devoid of woods, the immense, solid barns, the trim neatness of the little village delighted

him immensely, and he had never seen anything like the ocean of dandelions that spread in a yellow flood over the whole country.

There was not much time for mere admiration, however, for many things had to be done. Alice had left her fifty colonies of bees in the yard of the old Harman house; these had to be removed from their winter packing-cases and looked after. Immediately lumber for three hundred supers had to be bought for the new apiary, with three thousand frames and hundreds of pounds of foundation, and all these supplies had to be put together, while at the same time they had to secure and prepare two new locations for bee-yards, three or four miles away, to avoid keeping too many colonies in one spot, and overstocking the range.

In the midst of all this Carl arrived with his cargo. He looked considerably the worse for wear, and said that he had had little sleep during the six days' journey; but the bees were in good condition and roaring under their wire screens. Bob had ordered two motor-trucks and two large wagons to meet the car; and after thirty hours of hard work the car-load of hives was finally set down on their permanent stands. They made

three apiaries of more than a hundred colonies apiece—one at home and two on the land of friendly farmers three and four miles away.

"Got 'em here at last!" Alice exclaimed with satisfaction, looking at the serried rows of southern pine hives, on the yellow ground of dandelions, with a clump of flowering apple-trees at a little distance. "I don't suppose any bees in the world ever did so much traveling or went through such adventures."

"Yes, it 's hard to realize that these are the bees that stood out by Old Dick's cabin," said Joe.

"Remember the bayou and the mud and the titi and the dewberries? Wonder if they 'll know the honey-plants here when they see them."

But the sagacious insects made no difficulty about that. For a single half-day they were confused and frightened, stirring out little, and circling their hives to establish their location; then they went energetically to work, and in another day they were pouring in and out of the hives, carrying honey and pollen from the dandelions and the fruit-bloom. The familiar, working roar rose from the yard.

The boys had secured two bicycles and visited

the two "out-apiaries" almost daily. Alice confined herself mostly to the home yard, but sometimes inspected the others; for this was the really critical period. Clover-bloom would come within three weeks, and it was necessary to get all the colonies built up to their maximum strength to gather it.

"For it isn't as you have it in the South," she explained to Joe, "where there's honey coming in all the time. It all comes from clover here, and it only lasts about a month. Everything has to be absolutely ready for it, and then it 's a wild rush and scramble, and then it 's all over."

It sounded to Joe like an exciting speculation. The bees were certainly building up fast; the hives were full of young bees and brood, and the young queens were laying at a great rate. The bloom of dandelions and fruit-trees kept this stimulation up, but at last these came to an end, and there was a blank. There would be nothing more till the pink clover opened.

It was an anxious period. Many of the colonies were dangerously short of honey. They had brought little from the South, and with the heavy

brood-rearing they had used up the dandelion-honey as fast as gathered. There was no help but to feed sugar. Bob brought in a small wagon-load of hundred-pound sacks from the grocer, and a hundred pounds did not go far. And this further expense was an alarming item. Bob suggested selling fifty colonies.

"Bees are high now," he said. "We could get six or eight hundred dollars for fifty. It might be safer."

"Don't do it," said Joe. "There is n't any money that could buy these bees, after all we 've gone through to get them. No, we 'll go the whole hog—make or break!"

The bees were still building up, though more slowly now. On the twelfth of June Alice discovered the first clover-head open. Within the next day or two a perceptible pink began to show in the meadows, and then it turned suddenly chilly, with a cold rain.

The clover ceased to open and the bees to fly. For a whole week this lasted—a series of heavy, cold rains and chilly nights. To Joe it seemed a sort of nightmare; he grew disposed to think that real summer was unknown in Canada; but the

world grew marvelously green under the drench, and the clover grew tall and rank.

"It's holding the bees back," said Alice, "but it 'll be all the better if it only does turn dry now. Only we can't wait too long."

The rain ceased at last. The sky cleared; a cold north wind blew. It was worse than the wet weather. Then, with the sudden shift of the Northern spring, the wind swung round to the southwest. A shower fell that night, but a warm one. It was warm and damp the next morning. The earth steamed.

"Honey weather at last!" Bob cried. "Now if it only holds!"

The bees were at work that day, though but little clover was fully out. For the next two days they probably got little more than they consumed; but then, as it seemed, the pastures and meadows turned pink and white with a rush.

Joe heard the roar of the bees that morning before he was up. Before thinking of breakfast they all went out to look at the apiary. The air was like a snowstorm of bees. The insects were piling into the hives by scores, dropping heavy-laden on the entrance-boards, rushing wildly out

again for fresh loads. All the entrance-guards had been withdrawn. The honey flow was fully under way at last.

"Now we 're off to a good start," said Carl joyfully. "It 's all a gamble on the weather now for the next month."

"It 's a winning game. I just know the luck will hold," Alice laughed.

Joe went out with Bob that day to look at the other yards. The same wild activity was visible at all of them. Clover was everywhere—in the meadows grown for hay, in the fields where alsike was raised for its seed, along the roadsides, in the pastures. The air was warm and damp, and as the boys passed along the road there was a gust of heavy, honey-laden sweetness blown from the fields with every breath of wind.

"I reckon Alice is right," Joe remarked. "I never saw anything like this in my life. I don't believe these Alabama bees will know what to do with it all."

But the Alabama bees knew very well what to do with it. That night there was a heavy, contented roaring from all the hives in the yard, where the bees were arranging and ripening the

honey gathered that day. Peeping into one of the supers, Alice found that they were already beginning to turn the foundation sheets into white comb and to put honey into them.

For six days this wild rush continued. The weather remained warm but not too hot, with heavy dews at night and a dampness in the air. Joe was thunderstruck at the flood of honey, so different from the slow, dribbling honey flows of the South. At the end of the week all the supers were built full of comb, nearly filled with honey, and the bees were commencing to seal over the earliest cells.

"They'll need more room, and we haven't any more supers to put on. They're going to be crowded. Do you think they'll get to swarming?" Bob asked apprehensively. Swarming fever would be no joke in that large apiary, disorganizing the whole honey season.

"Hives with a young queen seldom swarm," said Alice. "Most of these queens were reared this spring. "We'd better start to extract just as soon as any of the honey is sealed, though."

The colonies which had been there all winter, however, mostly having queens a year or two old,

did get to swarming. For several days they were kept busy watching for swarms, clipping queens, and cutting out swarming-cells. The new swarms increased the apiary by fifteen colonies, but they would cheerfully have done without this addition.

For the last few days the honey flow had slackened a little. The first bloom of the clover was waning. More rain was needed. A great part of the honey in the supers was sealed over white and smooth, and they set up the extracting outfit.

It was a much more elaborate affair than the makeshift outfit at Old Dick's cabin. There was a large extractor that reversed automatically, a proper uncapping-box, several large tin storage-tanks, and an uncapping-knife kept hot by a jet of steam passed through the hollow blade. All this apparatus was much needed, for there was a great deal of honey already, and the supers from the "out-yards" all had to be hauled home for extracting and then taken back again.

The extracting-house was a former back kitchen, dry and clean, bee-tight, with screened windows and door, looking out upon the apiary.

Bob and Carl went out early in the morning to one of the "out-yards" and returned towards noon with a load of combs. Leaving them for Alice and Joe to extract, they started after dinner to the other yard. They reported that the bees were cross; very little honey was coming in, and they had to sort out the finished combs in the supers from the unsealed ones.

"We 've only got a beginning of a crop yet," said Bob. "It all depends now on whether we get rain. If not—it 's all over."

Joe and Alice worked hard all that day, but had not finished when the others came back with a fresh load. The next morning all four of them embarked on the task, and finished up the lot, which Carl took back to the out-yards alone, leaving Bob to take off honey from the home ranch.

It rained hard that afternoon, forcing him to stop outdoor work but filling their spirits with renewed hope. They worked in the sticky room, full of the smell of the fresh honey, over the whirling extractor, and watched the rain pouring down the window, till the tanks were all full and they had to draw the contents off into tins.

The crates of sixty-pound tins had been stored

in readiness for some time, and they worked till late that night, drawing off the honey and crating the honey up again for shipment.

"Ninety tins full," said Bob, counting them when they had finished. "We ought to get eighteen cents; that 'll make close to a thousand dollars. And this rain 'll start the honey flow again."

They did not get eighteen cents a pound, though. Next morning Bob telegraphed two of the principal honey-dealers of Toronto, and sixteen cents was the best offer he could get. And at this price he shipped it.

They were disappointed, too, in the effect of the rain. High winds succeeded it; the clover bloomed afresh, but there was no honey in the blossoms, dried up by the breeze. Every morning the Harmans watched the skies with almost agonizing interest. The slightest change in the weather might be worth thousands. Another day of violent rain came, and then once more the fickle clover began to yield.

It yielded slowly and spasmodically at first, a heavy day and then a light one. Then it ceased altogether, and with sinking hearts they began to believe that the season was a failure after all.

Then the temperature rose; hot, muggy days came, with heavy dews, and the roar and rush in the bee-yard began again.

Within four days they had to take out all the combs that had not before been handled, and extract them. Scarcely had they packed this honey when the formerly emptied ones were found full again. They were sealed within a few days more, and for day after day the extractor was hardly ever idle. Alice uncapped honey till her hands blistered. The uncapping-box had been filled many times with wax, and when they canned up the last lot of honey they found it more than twice as much as the former shipment. There were 185 sixty-pound tins which went to the city, and this time the market had improved slightly and they got seventeen cents a pound.

"Nineteen hundred dollars," Carl calculated. "Well, it 's not a great crop, but we 've more than covered expenses. And we still have the bees."

"Surely it is n't all over?" exclaimed Joe.

"Just about," said Bob, who had been studying the clover and the weather-signs. "All we 'll get now will be a few pickings."

All things must, in fact, come to an end, and

the clover-heads were turning brown. Few fresh ones were developing, and there seemed to be no honey in those few. The bees worked energetically still, but the supers did not show much result from it; and by degrees they slackened in their efforts and hung outside their hives in great, brown, murmuring masses.

"Might as well take the supers off and call it finished," said Alice, rather sadly. They had really no reason to complain, but with a first-class season they might easily have taken off twice as much.

A rainy period set in, however, before they could take off the supers, and for a week both the bees and the apiarists were scarcely ever able to go out undrenched. It rained every day, a soaking, steady rain that produced a wonderful hay-crop that year and made the wheat tall and heavy-headed. Then it cleared. Going out to investigate the nearest clover-field Carl came back reporting a fresh crop of bloom about to open.

"I do believe it 's going to begin all over again!" he exclaimed.

"That 's too good to be true," said Carl, pessimistically.

"Not a bit of it!" cried Alice. "It 's our luck. Don't we deserve it? I just knew we were going to get some more!"

In fact, after a single drying, chilly day, the honey flow began again almost with the vigor of the first days. A fresh crop of blossoms had come out with the rains, and the weather turned warm again, while the water-soaked ground provided moisture enough for continual honey secretion. The emptied combs in the supers began to fill once more with the water-clear nectar. The apiarists hardly dared to hope for this to last long. Every day they looked to see it stop; and they made no attempt to keep up with the bees by extracting. It was not likely, Bob argued, that they would do more than fill the supers at the most, and any excess would be put into the lower story anyhow, where it would be useful for next winter's supplies.

But for a full ten days the flow of nectar continued without a break. The supers were filled, crammed, and the bees were building combs under the bottom-bars and in all the crevices they could reach, as well as storing freely in the lower chamber. Two or three colonies even swarmed,

fairly crowded out, and disgusted with the lack of room. The bee-keepers, jubilant and uncertain, knew hardly what to do; and they were just making up their minds to extract some of the combs to give room when the honey flow dried up in a hot wave of three days. The thermometers went above ninety-five; the earth baked, and the clover blossoms turned brown and shriveled for the last time. The hot wave broke up in violent thunderstorms and rain, but there was no fresh bloom on the clover this time. The season was definitely over.

"I 'm almost glad of it," said Joe. "It was getting on my nerves, watching the weather and smelling the air every morning."

"I wish we could have just another week," Alice sighed, avariciously. "But never mind. Old Dick's bees have done pretty well for us."

There was no hurry now about extracting this last installment of the crop, and, besides, they had to wait for a fresh lot of sixty-pound tins. It was only when they began to take off the honey that they realized how large this last installment really was. Crowded for room, the bees had

crammed their combs to the last possible degree. Never had any of them seen such great, thick, blocky combs, sealed like white slabs from top-bar to bottom-bar of the frame. Extracting the first few supers amazed them. A super usually contains about forty pounds of honey, but these were averaging at least fifty.

"And they 've stored a lot in the brood-chamber," said Bob. "I lifted some of them. They 're almost heavy enough for winter. We won't need to do much feeding this fall."

Bob and Carl were bringing in honey at the home yard, while Alice uncapped the combs as usual, and Joe tended the extractor and drew off honey into the tank. The boiler of the steam-heated honey-knife bubbled over its oil flame, and the jet hissed upon the dripping wax; stray bees buzzed against the window-screen, and the extractor roared and whirred.

"Yes, Old Dick's outfit has done pretty well for us," said Joe, pausing while Alice uncapped a fresh set of combs. "There 's a heavy super of honey like these on every one of our 340 colonies, I reckon. Say only three hundred. That makes—let 's see!"

Taking a pencil, be began to figure on the board wall.

"Fifteen thousand pounds. And at sixteen cents a pound—" he ciphered again—"that makes two-thousand four hundred dollars. And we've already shipped a little less than three thousand dollars' worth. Over five thousand dollars, Alice, at the lowest reckoning! Hurrah for the swamp bees!"

"The pizen bees!" said Alice, laughing. "Yes, I hardly hoped for anything better. It 'll be a nice lump to divide, even after we pay back what you put into it."

"Pay back? I don't want you to pay back anything," Joe protested. "That was an investment, and I 'm drawing my dividends."

Alice laid down the hot knife that sent a hissing spurt of steam from the tip of its blade.

"We never could have got through without your investment, Joe," she said earnestly. "I can't tell you how glad I am that it 's turned out right. It was mostly on your account that I was anxious. But you 're not going to stay here. You 're going back South when the season is over, and—"

"I hope we 'll all go South," said Joe. "Sam is going to look up a lot more gums for us, and maybe we can repeat this deal—without any river pirates next time. Anwhow, we can start a yard of bees down there, and ship up a lot by express every spring, as we first thought of doing. We 'll get together the biggest apiary in the North—a thousand colonies, maybe. I 'm not going to ride the turpentine woods any more."

He stopped, and suddenly put one hand over Alice's honey-smeared hand on the edge of the extracting-box.

"Don't you see, Alice," he added, "that I want to stay around where you are—just as long as you want to have me?"

Alice hesitated, flushing; then impulsively she put her other hand over Joe's brown and sticky one.

"I expect I 'll want you a long time, Joe!" she said.

A sudden noise at the door made Alice hurriedly snatch up the knife again. Carl kicked the door open and came in, veiled and gloved, lugging a heavy super of combs.

"See here what I found in one of the combs!"

he exclaimed. He set down the super and held out a brown lump. "It was in one of the combs that came from the South. The bees had built a ball of wax around it. They did n't like it, I guess. A souvenir of the old bayou, eh?"

Joe took up the lump of beeswax, which Carl had pinched open. In its center was a conical dark object, encysted in the wax, buried as the bees will do with an object which they dislike but are unable to remove entirely. He picked out the hard little lump and held it up.

It was a flattened leaden bullet.

THE END

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